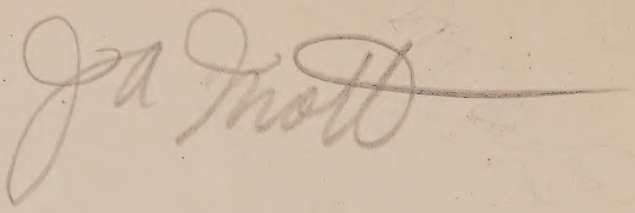
# SOLEMN JOHNSON PLUS

EARL WAYLAND BOWMAN



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# SOLEMN JOHNSON, PLUS

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BY

EARL WAYLAND BOWMAN

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THE RAMBLIN' KID, ETC.

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# SOLEMN JOHNSON PLUS

## CHAPTER I

### A BURRO, A SOCK AND DAWN

THE sun buried itself sullenly, like a giant red-hot stove lid, among the ragged peaks of Tombstone Range. As far as the eye could see, there was desolation, barrenness; the earth was as naked as the wind-swept mounds of Sahara. It was in the heart of the desert which curses with utter worthlessness the whole southwestern extremity of the state of Nevada.

A small mouse-colored burro, named "Versus," followed by two prospectors, shuffled through the yielding, still hot sands and stopped near a dwarf Joshua tree, in a narrow, insignificant gulch.

The prospectors were Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, for nearly forty years partners, dedicated mutually to the fascinating—yet at times heart-breaking—quest of man for the seams of mineral treasure hidden by nature, often in the most forbidding places of earth; sometimes under the frozen tundras of the Northland, sometimes beneath the waterless, heat-blighted wastes of the South.

"Reckon we'd just as well camp," Solemn Johnson mut-

tered, beginning to unleash the pack from the back of the burro.

"I reckon," Dirty Shirt Smith answered moodily; "I wish't to Gawd something would happen!"

"Something will," Solemn grunted, piling the camp outfit on the ground.

"Well, for blamed near forty years we've been expectin' it to," Dirty Shirt retorted, fretfully, "and it ain't yet! Things are getting kind of monotonous."

"One of the most despicable things under God's creation," Solemn broke in sharply, "is an old red-whiskered human centipede squasher who can't be patient enough to let Nature take her course.—*Versus, get your nose out of that fryin' pan!*"

Dirty Shirt's brown eyes flashed resentfully.

"My red whiskers ain't a bit redder than your yellow whiskers are yellow!" he flung back. "And as far as lettin' Nature take her course is concerned, nearly forty years of blamed near a steady diet of beans without anything especial happenin' don't seem hardly natural! And if it don't happen pretty quick I'll begin to get darn near discouraged——" He hesitated and glanced about at the litter of rock fragments cluttering the narrow gulch. "The chances are, scorpions are thicker around here than fleas are on a Piute Indian's dog!"

For a moment Solemn did not answer.

"It looks like mighty good scorpion territory to me," Dirty Shirt added glumly.

"Are you tryin' to be humorous?" Solemn snapped.

"Well, I'll bet this gulch is full of scorpions!" Dirty Shirt answered.

"Do you know of any gulch on this total desert that ain't full of scorpions?" Solemn snorted.

For a moment, Dirty Shirt pondered the question.

"Some's fuller'n others," he muttered.

"Yes, and some roses are fuller of thorns than others," Solemn retorted.

"Well, of all things——" Dirty Shirt flashed back. "Who ever heard of mentionin' 'roses' in an environment like this? It's danged near as undiplomatic as to refer to beer under these circumstances! And, personally, I don't see any connection between roses and scorpions, anyhow!"

"There don't need to be any connection between roses and scorpions," Solemn replied impatiently. "Only, if anybody's uneasy about thorns they'd better not try to pick roses, and if they're anxious about scorpions gettin' in their shoes and so forth to-night, they'd better hang them on that dwarf Joshua tree out of scorpions' reach!"

"That's what I was aimin' to do—I'd already figured that out!" Dirty Shirt answered tersely. "But if something unusual don't happen before another nearly forty years of slushin' around over this blasted old desert, I'm going to get disgusted and quit expectin' anything to ever happen!"

Solemn evidently did not consider the argument of sufficient importance to continue.

A couple of hours thereafter, the gray shadows mantling the infinitude of sand dunes had deepened into starlit darkness: silence, broken only occasionally by a sigh from Versus, filled the small gulch and Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith slept.

With the first fiery flash of the rising sun on the eastern rim of the desert the next morning, Dirty Shirt opened his eyes and glanced toward the dwarf Joshua tree on which he had draped his shoes and other clothing the night before. Versus was calmly chewing on one of his socks. Dirty Shirt leaped from his blankets, picked up a small boulder and shouted:

"Darn that fool burro! I'll knock her infernal head off!"

"What's she doin'?" Solemn grunted lazily.

"She's eatin' my sock. And I'll knock her blamed head off!"

"Well, just remember," Solemn warned, "that half of that burro, including her head, belongs to me, and when you start to knockin' her head off leave my half of her head where it is and——"

"My Gawd!" Dirty Shirt gasped. He had drawn back his arm to hurl the rock at Versus, and as he did so his eyes caught a strange glint.

"My Gawd, what?" Solemn asked, sitting up on his blankets.

"My Gawd—*Borax!*" Dirty Shirt cried, forgetting that Versus was eating his sock.

"Don't be so excited!" Solemn exclaimed. "And put on your—clothes—before you back into that bunch of cat-claw behind you. Hand it here and let me look at it!"

"I'll put 'em on when I please——" Dirty Shirt began.

"Leave 'em off forever, for all I care, and back into that cactus to your heart's content," Solemn interrupted, taking the stone, "but if you think you resemble a movin'-picture bathin' beauty prancin' around—— *My Gawd, that's what it is! It's almost solid, pure borax!*"

An hour later Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith had found the gigantic ledge, on the edge of the gulch, from which the fragment of virgin borax had come; had staked their claims and were the owners of the most tremendous borax property ever discovered—before or since—by mortal man.

Thus, briefly, was initiated the borax mine which, with amazing suddenness, made the two hundred-and-seven-person, one Chinese laundry, one livery stable, one two-

story frame hotel, seven-saloon, et cetera, metropolis of Red Bluff, out in the midst of the imperishable desert, not only plausible but inevitable; and at the same time turned upon Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith—after nearly forty years of expectation—a golden flood of royalties which, had they been men of less stamina in their understanding and appreciation of true fundamental values, would, no doubt, have quickly swamped them.

The borax mine, Red Bluff and many things that happened thereafter had their inception in a burro's desire to eat Dirty Shirt's sock, and Dirty Shirt's not unnatural impulse to pick up a rock and—"knock her infernal head off."

Allegorically chronicled it happened like this:

Versus started to eat Dirty Shirt's sock at sunrise on Monday morning, of a certain early springtime; the following day, Tuesday, noon, Solemn and Dirty Shirt were well on their way to Pinnochle to tell the world that they were owners of the greatest borax lode in existence. Friday, Solemn and Dirty Shirt, plus Versus, passed through Sodamint Canyon, up which a short distance they often intended ultimately to locate a tungsten prospect and dig a tunnel into a small cliff; they paused for a short rest at Hellbroth Oasis, and emerged late the next night, Saturday, into the midst of Pinnochle. Sunday morning they gave out the first information of the new and sensational borax discovery; Monday, at two P.M. the International Consolidated Borax Trust, through its local representative, made Solemn and Dirty Shirt a flattering offer for first serialization and all other rights and agreed immediately to bring the borax out on the screen and pay liberal royalties on all releases thereof. At two-fifteen P.M., the same day, Solemn and Dirty Shirt, in the presence of the president, cashier and as-

sistant cashier of the Pinnochle Southwestern Prudential National Bank, signed the contract, received a magnificent first payment and the next morning, Tuesday, at dawn again started for the borax beds.

On the succeeding Monday, after having been passed repeatedly by unexpected traffic on the adjacent desert, Solemn and Dirty Shirt, plus Versus, arrived again at the scene of Versus' assault on Dirty Shirt's sock. To their astonishment they found the two-hundred-and-seven-population, one Chinese laundry, seven-saloon metropolis of Red Bluff already established and doing a splendid business in all seven saloons, etc., directly across the gulch from the immense studio the Borax Trust had erected in the interval and the smoke and dust from which rose industriously, whirling in playful, careless eddies about the abrupt summit of Slaughter House Hill, overlooking Rattlesnake Canyon.

"That's what I call quick work," Dirty Shirt exclaimed admiringly, prodding Versus with the "get-up" stick as they hurried along the wide, single-sided street of Red Bluff; "I don't think I ever knowed of a metropolis bein' born quicker."

"It ain't important how quick she was born," Solemn grunted; "the main thing is that she *is* born!"

"Well, there ain't any doubt but what she's born," Dirty Shirt replied. "And just when I was beginning to think nothing ever would happen—here this has all gone and happened!"

"As old as you are," Solemn replied scornfully, "you ought to know that something is always bound to happen eventually if anybody just don't get too darned impatient; and what's already happened is only a starter to what'll happen before things quit happenin' permanently. Some people just get too dog-gone anxious and want things to happen before it's time for them to happen!"

Dirty Shirt grinned, and prodded Versus once more, with the get-up stick.

"We'll make a trip along the whole main artery of commerce," Solemn went on, "and swing around to that sand ridge in the rear of what looks like Saloon Number Four and camp; after which we'd better just reconnoiter a while and get the lay of things before making any permanent program!"

With some reluctance Versus was induced to pass Saloons Number One, Two, Three and Four, from which the odor of fresh beer emanated. It was accomplished, however, as was also the temporary passing of Saloons Number Five, Six and Seven, the latter being the final oasis and directly adjacent to the livery stable.

Midway between Saloon Number Four and what seemed to be Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel, Dirty Shirt observed a sign over the front of a narrow building built of boards, closely abutting the edge of the street. The sign was readable and brief; it said:

WONG GEE'S CAFÉ—NO CHECKS CASHED

"That looks like it might be a restaurant!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, his brown eyes brightening.

"Hanged if it don't," Solemn agreed unexpectedly. "What do you say we establish camp by that sand ridge behind Saloon Number Four, turn Versus loose so she can explore things too, then come back here and buy our suppers from the Chinaman instead of cooking them ourselves, to-night?"

"Sounds feasible to me," Dirty Shirt replied with almost boyish eagerness. "I'm kind of tired of beans myself. Besides, it'll give us a good start toward seein' what else has happened or is liable to happen if anything else does happen."

"You don't need to worry," Solemn broke in as they turned toward the small sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four, "things never have quit happenin' yet and as far as I can see they never will quit and nobody knows what'll happen or when it'll happen, but that ain't any sign they won't happen sometime or other——" He broke off suddenly, sniffed as they passed behind Wong Gee's café. "Hurry up," he added, "I'm beginnin' to get an appetite!"

"So am I. And a dog-gone good one!" Dirty Shirt grinned, once again punching Versus gently with the get-up stick.

## CHAPTER II

### ANGEL

WONG GEE bustled hospitably about the interior of the café as Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, having piled their camp equipment at the base of the small sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four and released Versus to her own designs, returned and stepped into the restaurant. The place was immaculately neat and clean and filled with the inviting odors always welcome to those who, like Solemn and Dirty Shirt, had traveled far across the hot, slithering desert sands without stopping for food or the opportunity to drink.

Scarcely were Solemn and Dirty Shirt seated when Wong Gee, in spotless apron and jacket, glided forward to attend their wants.

"Gimme some ham an' eggs and fried potatoes," Solemn ordered, "and turn the eggs over—Got any eggs?"

"Plenty good eggs, velly flesh!"

"Make mine the same and——" Dirty Shirt was interrupted. A shrill, challenging, yet melancholy crow echoed suddenly through the restaurant.

"What'n blazes was that?" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, startled.

"Angel," Wong Gee answered gently, "him Angel."

"'Angel?'"

"'Angel,'" Wong Gee repeated, fondly, "him velly fine, heap champlion fightin' looster! Lickee all loosters in Bla'stow!"

As if to verify Wong Gee's words, a slim-built, long legged, extensive necked, black and red, probably half-breed Indian game rooster stalked through the kitchen door into the dining-room. In the fowl's eye was a pensive melancholia that immediately appealed to the humane impulses of the two simple-souled, tender-hearted old prospectors.

"What's the matter with him?" Dirty Shirt asked. "He looks discouraged or something!"

Angel walked listlessly about among the tables, indifferently pecking at a fly here, carelessly absorbing a cockroach or a bread crumb there; his straggly two-feather tail drooped and the almost reptilian head, with the long dagger-bill, occasionally turned wistfully to one side while a vacant, "what-the-devil's-th'-use" expression came into the large jet-black eyes with their yellow rims.

"He does act sort of dejected!" Solemn observed.

"Angel, him lonesome," Wong Gee sighed. "Him velly much lonesome! No chlickens, no fightin' loosters in Led Bluff—Angel, him only sclappin' looster in Led Bluff! Make him too much sickee because no have sclap enough!"

"That's bad," Solemn sympathized, "it's awful for anything to be lonesome like that."

"You ought to get him a wife," Dirty Shirt advised, "maybe if you'd get him a nice good-natured wife or two——"

"No, no!" Wong Gee interrupted quickly, sadly, "Angel no good fo' wife; him old bachelo' looster! Gottee him one—two—wife in Bla'stow, one time! Pletty soon Angel want to sclap—no looster to sclap, so Angel sclap wife.—Next day have to make chlicken flicassee out of Angel's wife—both two wifes! Wife no good fo' Angel; him need plenty looster to sclap!"

Solemn and Dirty Shirt sighed; Angel's unfortunate predicament depressed them considerably.

That evening after they had finished their ham and eggs, looked the fresh, vibrant, seven-saloon metropolis of Red Bluff over carefully, Solemn and Dirty Shirt wandered nonchalantly into Saloon Number One, gazed thoughtfully around, sized things up, and made their immortal announcement:

"Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith are goin' to celebrate!"

## CHAPTER III

### SOLEMN FEELS SORRY FOR ANGEL

SOLEMN and Dirty Shirt were faithful to their promise, and during the next six months the matter of Angel more or less slipped from their minds.

Meanwhile, Wong Gee's belligerent half-breed Indian game, dragged through disconsolate, fightless days, only occasionally having a round or two with "Blazer," Chuck Roden's white, corkscrew tailed bulldog puppy. But Blazer was relatively immature as a boxing partner for Angel, and the bouts usually ended in the penultimate of Round Number One, when a pale streak, having the appearance of a small bulldog in a dreadful hurry, could be noticed heading for the back door of Saloon Number Four—and praying that it was open,—where his master was assistant chauffeur of the faro box.

Then came the time when Solemn and Dirty Shirt had a sudden revulsion, resigned permanently as chief inebriates of Red Bluff and sighed once more for the consolation of contact with the silent restful desert. The next two months thereafter they spent on the raw edge of Hellfire Basin, near the foot of Dead Angel Mountain, a short distance from Hydrophobia Gulch, in recuperation from the half-year previous.

Succeeding Solemn and Dirty Shirt's vacation was the banquet when Red Bluff, under the auspices of Colonel Spilkins, Red Bluff's scholarly postmaster, and others,

got Versus, their faithful mouse-colored burro, drunk on champagne and then insulted her with beans, resulting in the adjournment of the banquet.

Chronologically, it is now the following night; three A.M.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt paused beside the shed under which, next door to the blacksmith shop, the Borax Trust had lately installed the new prop manufacturing plant, *viz.:* one thirty-six-inch buzz-saw, propelled by one six horse-power gasoline engine, operated by Pedro; the intention being to reduce to proper length the massive timbers used in holding up the roof of the borax mine.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt had just completed a thorough and comprehensive tour of Red Bluff's seven gurgle emporiums and were en route to their cozy, if small cabin by the sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four, for a well-earned night's rest. Their thoughts dwelt on Angel and his pathetic isolation as the exclusive fighting rooster of the sudden metropolis of Red Bluff, which had so spontaneously echoed to the discovery of the borax mine.

"Something has got to be done about it," Solemn said, with a catch in his voice, as he and Dirty Shirt leaned against the southwest corner post of the buzz-saw shed. "There ain't no use talkin'," he went on, earnestly, "Angel's got to be provided with a chance to fight any danged time he wants to fight! I feel plumb worried about that rooster, he's gettin' sadder and sadder lookin' every day!"

"That's what I figure," Dirty Shirt agreed, "it's a darned outrage for anything to be prohibited self-expression that way! I was readin' in a paper once about how bein' self-repressed wrecks the constitutional works of people, and if Angel is repressed too blamed long he's bound to blow up. I'm a notion to write to that paper I was readin' about it in; I believe th' name of it was

*Quicksilver*—or—anyhow, it was somethin' like that! The editor of it would probably tell us what to do to un-repress Angel!"

"Maybe it would be a good scheme——" Solemn began and stopped suddenly.

Almost miraculously an idea flashed into Solemn's mind. It was coincident with the appearance of "Old Bob," the veteran brindle tomcat attached to Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel. Old Bob was the lone feline inhabitant of Red Bluff. Evidently he, also, had been attending a party or something, possibly down at the livery stable to catch a couple of mice, or endeavoring to get acquainted with a polecat that had recently unexpectedly taken up its residence in a hole under the northeast corner thereof; and was drifting through the white moonlight of early morning back toward home. As Old Bob's graceful form, husky and close knit, also muscular, appeared before the eyes of Solemn the idea was born.

"Kitty, kitty, come, kitty!" Solemn called caressingly.

"What you goin' to do?" Dirty Shirt asked.

"Never mind what I'm going to do," Solemn retorted ungraciously; "even if I told you, some folks are too darned dense or intoxicated, to comprehend!"

Dirty Shirt ignored the rebuff; he felt too tired at the moment to argue; and anyhow, nearly forty years' partnership and association with Solemn had familiarized Dirty Shirt, to a certain extent, with the latter's idiosyncrasies.

"Come on," Solemn said sharply, lifting Old Bob in his arms and starting toward Wong Gee's café.

Dirty Shirt began to have an inkling of the thought in Solemn's mind and, tired as he was, he grinned.

Old Bob was an armful for Solemn. But Solemn did not complain. He felt that he was bound on an errand

of mercy. If he could provide Angel with even a temporary vent for his too-long suppressed desire to annihilate something, Solemn considered that the mere physical exertion of lugging a twelve-pound tomcat through the wide, deserted, one-sided street of Red Bluff at three-five A.M. while the white moon shone softly down and exquisite peace and calmness lay over the adjacent desert, was a trifling sacrifice on his part. For Solemn, like Dirty Shirt, had never been able to wholly efface from his memory the pathetic appeal he had seen in Angel's black eyes that evening, eight months, or about that before, when he and Dirty Shirt had first invested in ham and eggs in Wong Gee's restaurant.

Wong Gee had retired, hours before, to his sleeping quarters in the pantry between the kitchen and the dining-room.

"What's the mallow? What th' hell makee all 'a noise?" Wong Gee queried sleepily, in response to Solemn's impatient rattling of the door. "Who you? What you wantee?"

"Open up, Wong Gee," Solemn called, "we've got a proposition!"

"'Ploposition?'" Wong Gee flung back, opening the door. "What you mean 'ploposition'?"

"A proposition to give Angel some exercise," Solemn replied as he and Dirty Shirt stepped inside the café.

"We've got a project for entertainin' Angel," Dirty Shirt chipped in, now fully cognizant of Solemn's plan; "we've got a dandy scheme to help him unrepress and have a fight! Bring him out—Will he fight a cat?"

"Angel fight anything—cat—dog, devil, clyclone—even what you call him?—buzz-saw! Him lonesome allee time fo' fight anything—Angel fight buzz-saw——"

"So will Old Bob," Solemn laughed, "that's what

give me the idea! Between them they ought to enjoy it quite a lot!"

Angel crowed lustily from his coop behind the restaurant; Old Bob squirmed in Solemn's arms and meowed.

"Bring him out!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed. "Go get Angel and let him and Old Bob turn loose——"

But Solemn had suddenly acquired a larger vision.

"That ain't the process at all!" he interrupted. "This ain't going to be no amateur contest—this is a championship engagement! And the combatants have got to be trained——"

"Angel, him always tlained!" Wong Gee broke in. "Him too damned tlained allee time! Angel never quit bein' tlained!"

"Well, we'll train him a little extra for this episode," Solemn declared. "Besides, the rest of the population is entitled to witness the destruction! All we wanted to do to-night was sign up the articles of incorporation and deposit Old Bob. Dirty Shirt can train Angel and I'll personally manage Old Bob myself. We'll hold the fight in Saloon Number Four, next Saturday P.M., and show Red Bluff a gladiatorial explosion that will knock the spots off of civilization!"

## CHAPTER IV

### OLD BOB DISAPPEARS

For the several succeeding days Mother Skillern, pleasant, matronly, blue-eyed proprietress of Red Bluff's only two-story frame hotel and mistress as well of Old Bob, the brindle tomcat in question, wondered where Old Bob had gone.

Old Bob himself had no doubt whatever as to his location. He was in the lower story of the double-deck wire coop behind Wong Gee's café, and the most disagreeable rooster extant lived on the upper floor.

Those were Old Bob's sentiments. Day and night, without ceasing, he was reminded of rooster; he could hear rooster, smell rooster, through the cracks in the ceiling of his apartment, could see rooster, and fervently in his heart Old Bob resolved that if ever he got the chance he would scratch, claw, bite, murder and eat rooster! This ambition was stimulated by the consummate cunning of Solemn Johnson's system of training Old Bob. It was simple: Nothing to eat except barely enough raw liver to make Old Bob's appetite a two-edged sword, one edge a trifle sharper than the other.

Angel, himself, fostered to a degree Old Bob's growing unfondness for rooster. If Old Bob wanted to take a nap, Angel selected that particular time of day or night to indulge in crowing practise; should Old Bob desire to meditate, Angel instantly developed an irresistible pas-

sion to scratch gravel, and kept Old Bob busy dodging things which fell through the open spaces in the ceiling.

Not only that, but Old Bob had an intuitive feeling that that unmentionable rooster was beginning to look down upon him; assume a superiority that was unjustified; consider himself a whole lot better than cats in general and Old Bob especially.

Solemn watched the maturing of rooster antipathy in Old Bob's soul and chuckled with glee.

"When this thing's over," he boasted sneeringly to Dirty Shirt, "Angel will come up minus any more ambition to ever fight again! After Saturday P.M., the champion fightin' rooster of the Western Hemisphere is going to answer to the name of 'Old Bob,' even if said rooster is a brindle, bob-tailed old tomcat!"

To which Dirty Shirt replied with fervor:

"You are teetotally crazy! When my client, designated Angel, gets through with your imitation pugilist you'll be the worst disappointed old yaller-whiskered, leather-cheeked centipede squasher that ever existed; and said Angel will continue to wear th' fightin' rooster laurels of the ultimate world, plus which, he'll also have the additional glory of bein' known as the best cat-exterminator ever invented!"

Solemn snorted derisively and took a chew of tobacco.

Dirty Shirt was sincere. He had seen Angel respond remarkably to the line of treatment he had been administering and which consisted merely in unlimited raw eggs mixed with cayenne pepper and cracker crumbs. At the first taste of eggs and cayenne, Angel instantly recognized the time-honored formula preceding a battle. His eyes lighted with new-found hope and eagerness and the look of drooping despondency left him. He crowed with refreshed vigor and wondered where in thunder the rooster he was going to fight was keeping

himself. No answering crow echoed to his repeated challenges.

True, there was something in the coop below him, but Angel heard its meows instead of crows and knew it was cat. The odor of cat also came up through the floor and Angel resented it. He never did like cat much, anyhow, and this one seemed to consider the lower apartment his permanent address. Which was obnoxious to Angel.

In addition to that, Angel could frequently hear him spitting, and a cat spitting had always been an abomination and outrage to the sensibilities of Angel. Therefore, Angel took malicious delight in swearing at that unpleasant cat, who lived below him, in the most classical rooster profanity he could devise. Also, Angel concluded that after he had licked whoever he was going to fight, he'd work some scheme to get in contact with the cat in question and show him up for just what he was; give him a thoroughly scientific rooster rough-and-tumble.

Angel's vivacity filled Dirty Shirt Smith with pride and pleasurable anticipation as to the outcome of the approaching engagement. And Dirty Shirt was leaving no stone unturned or it might be said, egg unbroken, to have his principal in the pink of condition when he entered the arena.

## CHAPTER V

### OLD BOB IN DISGUISE

José Gabica Pasadena San Diego Garcia, affectionately known about Red Bluff as "Chico," not only operated the guitar department of the orchestra in the dance hall attachment of Saloon Number Two, but in days of yore, in far-away Mexico, had been a famous professional preparer of rooster matadors for the ring. To Chico, Dirty Shirt Smith appealed on Saturday morning for the last word in topping-off Angel for the sanguinary affair of the afternoon.

"Just what would you do, Chico," Dirty Shirt queried in a whisper when he met the distinguished Mexican musician and rooster trainer, "if you wanted a rooster to be totally sure of winning the greatest battle of his life? What would you give him for the final supreme stimulation, something to make him willing to fight, well, for instance, a tiger or a catamount, or cyclone, or—or —a buzz-saw, or anything like that?"

"Ah, *amigo mio,*" Chico replied, his eyes glittering with memories of other more splendid days when all Mexico acclaimed him the greatest engineer of fighting roosters between Tiajuana and Calabasca, "there is one thing, Señor, which will give to a rooster the 'finish'— the ambition to fight anything, even as you say, the tiger, the catamount, the cyclone, or the buzz-saw itself!"

"What is it?" Dirty Shirt asked eagerly.

Chico leaned closer and whispered a single magic word:

*"Mirrihuana!"*

"My Gawd, yes! I forgot about it!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, "but where'll I get any?"

Chico winked.

"I—myself—will give Angel a dose, Señor Dirty Shirt!"

Angel didn't know what the idea was in mixing the pulverized stuff, which resembled tea leaves, with the usual raw egg and cayenne pepper, but it tasted pretty good and he ate it anyhow. The thing Angel did know was that in a little while he felt that life wouldn't be worth living unless he could kill something—several somethings—immediately.

He trembled, thrilled, vibrated with the most stupendous desire imaginable to fight the whole rooster population, all the cats in the world, plus the dog inhabitants, and everything else that existed, in one glorious simultaneous tackle! That last shot of egg and cayenne, spiked with the other something Chico had mixed in it, in Angel's judgment, certainly had exploding atoms beaten six of the longest blocks in Salt Lake City when it came to generating impulses for universal and unabridged destructiveness, murder, assassination.

Angel was feeling exquisitely vicious and vindictive when Dirty Shirt slipped him, despite his bloodthirsty struggles, into a sack and started for the scene of carnage-to-be at two-forty P.M. sharp on that memorable Saturday afternoon.

"I'll be along in a minute with Old Bob!" Solemn Johnson promised, as Dirty Shirt, closely followed by Wong Gee, headed for Saloon Number Four.

For legitimate reasons, Solemn wished also to convey

Old Bob under cover to the battle-ground. He stepped into the kitchen to see if he could locate an empty gunny sack. None was available, and Solemn continued his search into the pantry-bedroom Wong Gee occupied, and in which he likewise stored potatoes and other bulky provisions. Still no sack was in sight.

Searching about, Solemn stumbled over a newly opened five-gallon keg of molasses; barked his shins on the edge of the keg and swore. He glanced toward the bed and decided to take the pillow slip in which to carry Old Bob over to Saloon Number Four. As he jerked the pillow from the bed, the most brilliant inspiration of his career hit Solemn. For a moment the magnitude, the beauty, the originality of the conception staggered him.

"I'll show them Red Bluffers and that old red-whiskered, wart-on-the-neck Dirty Shirt Smith a new kind of rooster!" he muttered. "They're wantin' shocks and by gosh they'll get one in this case at least!"

To think with Solemn was to act.

He hurried to the coop, grabbed Old Bob by the neck, yanked him out of his prison and retraced his steps to the pantry. There he wrapped the pillow slip around the cat's head—for safety's sake—soused the rest of his furry body into the five-gallon keg of thick, gummy molasses; pulled him out of the mess, ripped open Wong Gee's perfectly good, chicken feather pillow, rolled Old Bob in the mass of feathers, dropped the totally feathered, efficiently metamorphosed cat into the pillow slip, and hastened toward Saloon Number Four, to keep the tryst of slaughter with Angel and Dirty Shirt Smith.

Red Bluff had been advised merely, and mysteriously, that a worthy foeman, and one, too, who would gratify Angel's fighting ambition to a frazzle, had at last been discovered. Solemn, Dirty Shirt and Wong Gee had kept the name and identity of the Great Unknown an

inviolate secret. Partly was this due to the inherent tendency of the trio to be dramatic; but principally was it because of possible objections Mother Skillern might advance against Old Bob's participation in the unusual and possibly cruel pastime of rooster-cat prize-fighting.

A large assortment of Red Bluff had assembled in the main auditorium of Saloon Number Four, waiting for the spectacular event to occur. The tension was perceptible.

As Solemn stepped through the door, a hush of expectancy settled over the throng. In the silence there came, like the wail of a lost soul, fragmentary shrieks from the complaining buzz-saw down at the prop manufacturing establishment, next to the blacksmith shop, as Pedro pushed the knot-filled timbers against the whirling steel teeth.

Mother Skillern sat on the porch of the two-story frame hotel and wondered what had become of Old Bob.

## CHAPTER VI

### OLD BOB GOES HOME

THE rules agreed upon by Solemn and Dirty Shirt were simple: Each was to stand on an opposite side of the circle the spectators would form in the center of the room, dump their respective gladiators on to the floor and let Angel and Old Bob each react to his own natural impulses.

"Ready!" Solemn yelled.

"Fire!" Dirty Shirt echoed.

Out of Dirty Shirt's sack Angel slid. A light of unimpeachable murder was in his eyes. Simultaneously something skidded with a squashy thud from Solemn's pillow slip and hit the floor on the other side of the human ring.

Spectators caught their breaths in horror; many of them thinking it had come at last and they were seeing things that were not when they got the first glimpse of Old Bob, superimposed into a cross between a bird and a cat.

Old Bob himself felt queer as the mischief, and looked more so. But he saw Angel, that despicable rooster, standing before him and all of Old Bob's desire for revenge, all his ambition to eat rooster and get even for indignities heaped upon him during the last several days flamed instantly into a seething conflagration. Old Bob squatted, arched his back, started to spit and swear in low

guttural accents and began to swell up—his plumage, from the small pin-feathers behind his ears to the cluster adherent to his inch-and-a-half tail, sticking out in terrifying disarray.

At first Angel thought that he also was seeing things. A second look convinced him that his first impression was right; there wasn't such a thing as that thing in front of him! It couldn't be possible. Still, it seemed to appear like it was. What it was, Angel tried hard to figure out. It looked as if it might be rooster; it resembled cat; perhaps it was both! But Angel was yet in doubt. He had fought virtually every animal and fowl mentioned in the zoological vernacular, but never anything which looked like this. He wondered if that last shot of egg and cayenne, plus the other stuff with which Chico had spiked it, had affected his imagination.

Then a sudden, unholy joy took possession of Angel. He saw through it all. This new device inviting destruction before him was a sort of epitome of the total animal and fowl creation! The whole works, in some strange manner, had been conveniently resolved into a single specimen, the sole purpose being to facilitate Angel's feverish passion to kill a couple of multitudes of things all at once; at one operation, without hesitation.

Proceeding on that theory, Angel's head lowered threateningly, the two plumes in his tail were elevated defiantly, his neck was stretched forward, the sinews of his legs became taut and the feathers along his backbone bristled upward as if each was a saw-toothed bayonet thirsting to stab the life-blood out of some cringing enemy.

Old Bob had already outlined his campaign.

Twelve pounds of hungry, insulted, feather-decorated cat hurtled through the air, aiming to land on top of

Angel and start the pleasurable task of executing a rooster. Old Bob was disappointed. Angel wasn't there.

Midway in the journey something sounding like Angel had passed overhead, flying low, and kicked Old Bob twice on the side of the neck as it went by. Old Bob himself was reasonably quick, and twisted a hind leg up in time to rake a bunch of feathers off of Angel's wishbone.

"This is goin' to be good!" Colonel Spilkins exclaimed.

"Who said *'goin' to be!'*" the crowd yelled.

Old Bob and Angel were not wasting time telling what was "going to be." They were busy making it happen.

Old Bob swung a front paw for the white meat of Angel's bosom; Angel side-flopped and countered with right and left spur jabs to the region of Old Bob's appendix. Old Bob reversed his mode of attack and leaped again for general assault, but went bottom side up so all four feet, as well as teeth, would be available for action when the bombing plane named Angel scooted over him. Angel nose-dived to the left and spotted two inshoots of his bill under Old Bob's ear.

But Old Bob was busy, too; he shot out his right front paw and as Angel tilted for altitude he connected with the rooster's secondary Adam's apple, and where two tail feathers grew before there wasn't any anymore.

It began to look as if it would end in mutual cancellation.

At this stage, Old Bob made another categorical attack. Angel outguessed him. He did not pass entirely over; instead, he zoomed unexpectedly and came down astride Old Bob's back. Angel cinch-locked his spurs into Old Bob's feather-encrusted hide just back of his brisket; his bill closed over Old Bob's left ear and he began to chew.

Old Bob—expectorated—and swore, end-flopped and sunfished, and raked Angel's drum-sticks fore and aft with his hind claws; but Angel was a rough-riding rooster with a diploma for stick-on-it-iveness and he declined to dismount.

All of which caused a sudden wave of nostalgia to sweep over Old Bob. He remembered it had been days since he had seen Mother Skillern, or the dear familiar old lounging place under the office table in Red Bluff's two-story frame hotel. He decided to take whatever was riding him home and show it to Mother Skillern. To that end, Old Bob hit the breeze and hit it with all four spark plugs clicking in unison. The sharp turn at the door of Saloon Number Four caused him to skid and he did a multiple scoot and somersault. Angel, as a result, was totally unseated. Old Bob didn't wait.

Angel had just straightened up, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and released one crow when Mother Skillern, at practically the other end of the street, saw something shoot on to the porch of the hotel, ricochet through the door—fortunately open—slide across the dining-room and come to a stop under the sideboard in the corner next to the 'commercial men's' table.

"My Gawd!" Mother Skillern said.

Whatever it was she had seen looked like an excited sofa cushion, without any cover on it, which was in the last stages of disreputable moulting; but it had four legs, was shaped like a cat, turned around when safely under the china cabinet and humbly said:

"Meow!"

Later, Mother Skillern gave Old Bob a bath; hand-picked him; plucked him; curried him; finally eliminated most of the feathers Wong Gee missed from his pillow that night. She also made some remarks about the male population of Red Bluff.

## CHAPTER VII

### SO DOES ANGEL

ANGEL? . . .

After Old Bob departed for Mother Skillern's hotel, Angel paused, in the midst of admiring friends, in front of Saloon Number Four; announced that he had but recently licked all the roosters and cats in creation and also, like Alexander, that he wished to heaven there were more worlds to conquer, more cats, roosters, et cetera, to annihilate. A moment afterward, Angel proved that he was sincere.

Pedro pushed an extra large timber against the teeth of the buzz-saw down at the prop factory, adjacent to the blacksmith shop. The buzz-saw swore at a knot in the log in the high treble piccolo accents buzz-saws affect.

Angel cocked his head to one side and listened. It sounded to him as if another fool rooster was inviting some one to come and "fight it out." Maybe, after all, one had been left out of the combination Angel had just exterminated. Very well, Angel would go see!

Solemn Johnson, Dirty Shirt Smith and the other spectators followed hastily.

The buzz-saw shrieked wickedly at another large knot as Angel arrived at the open-air shed of the prop mill.

Angel replied with a torrent of defiant abuse; squinted his eyes at the thing spinning dizzily, like a blur, before

him; admitted that this stranger-rooster was something unusual when it came to action, but decided to tackle him anyhow.

Game chicken was well splattered over Pedro's hands, face and clothing before he could throw the switch and stop the buzz-saw.

"My Gawd, Angel has self-assassinated himself!" Solemn Johnson muttered, horrified at the spectacle.

"He sure as lightnin' has," Dirty Shirt Smith replied, picking up a fragment of Angel and handing it to Wong Gee, "too much *mirrihuana!* When will we have th' funeral, Wong Gee?"

"Funelal?" Wong Gee answered. "No 'funelal!' Chlicken flicassee—plenty nice Angel flicassee with noodles to-mollow fo' dinner!"

Dirty Shirt did not reply. Instead he looked at Solemn; Solemn returned the look, and there was understanding. They started up the street toward Saloon Number Four behind which, at the foot of the small sand ridge, their cozy cabin nestled. For a few steps there was silence.

"Guess we'd better put on some beans to boil this evening," Solemn observed.

"Yeah, I reckon we had," Dirty Shirt replied. "I don't think I want to eat dinner at Wong Gee's café tomorrow, either!"

Mother Skillern suddenly appeared on the front porch of the hotel; Solemn and Dirty Shirt quickened their steps and hurried on, not anxious at the moment for an interview with the usually pleasant tempered hostess of Red Bluff's only two-story frame hotel, and little dreaming that within a few short months, from the very porch on which Mother Skillern now indignantly stood, they would lead Horace Duranto into an Adventure which would result in almost the total undoing of Horace.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PERFECT ALIBI

THE undoing of Horace Duranto, and in which Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith participated to a certain extent, occurred approximately six months after the tragic elimination of Angel, Wong Gee's former fighting rooster. Also, as in the case of Angel, Old Bob, for whose not entirely unwilling part in that affair Mother Skillern had long since forgiven Solemn and Dirty Shirt, was cast in a rather important rôle in the events that caused Horace to change his mind.

In a small hole, about the size of that which a badger would make, underneath the northeast corner of the livery stable, in the two-hundred-and-seven-population metropolis of Red Bluff, long before the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was invented, there lived a polecat. From whence he came, or why, none troubled to inquire. It was sufficient for Red Bluff that he was there.

A resident polecat was logical enough in Red Bluff.

Nothing more completely harmonized with the general scenic phenomenon of Red Bluff than did a polecat which lived in a hole under the corner of the livery stable.

A polecat, recognized as an inalienable citizen, was as much a part of the atmospheric ensemble of Red Bluff as was Red Bluff itself a fitting and adequate adornment of the gigantic desert of which Red Bluff was the com-

mercial nucleus and which bestowed its aridity over the total anticlimax of southwestern Nevada, as well as somewhat beyond the edge into the adjacent self-centered section called southern California.

"A polecat," Heterogeneous Saunders, proprietor of the livery stable in question, declared, "is just naturally good luck! When there's a polecat around things run reasonably smooth. People as a rule are careful how they act."

The announcement was made at second drink time in the Seventh Oasis shortly after the impromptu self-installation of the polecat in the hole under the corner of the livery stable.

"Calmness in the presence of a polecat is essential!" laughingly observed Colonel Spilkins, Red Bluff's scholarly postmaster and one of the crowd to whom Heterogeneous' remark was addressed. "A polecat is inherently entitled to the right of way. Also, as a preventer of rashness he constitutes a perfect alibi——"

"That's what I'm going to call my polecat!" Heterogeneous interrupted happily, "'Perfect Alibi!' I never heard of a polecat by that name before, and that's what this one is going to be designated! In addition, he can room at the livery stable permanent if he wants to. I'll bet he brings somebody success!"

Thus Perfect Alibi was christened and accepted as a part of the landscape in Red Bluff.

Usually Perfect Alibi spent his days in retirement. Only when the first shades of twilight were beginning to dim the faint outlines of the distant Tombstone Range would Perfect Alibi wander candidly about the street of Red Bluff.

It added a picturesque note to the local color scheme for one to step out of Wong Gee's café, for instance, and suddenly discover a large black polecat, with a white

stripe down his back and a beautiful plumelike, eighteen-inch tail, sitting calmly by the side of the door. One instinctively wondered!

"That polecat certainly possesses remarkable self-control!" Colonel Spilkins often commented admiringly, as Perfect Alibi strolled casually into the midst of the crowd in one or the other of the seven various oases and deftly picked a vagrant fly from the front of the bar, or nibbled quietly at a damp spot on the floor where fragments of beer had recently fallen.

"Perfect Alibi is an entire gentleman and knows completely how to conduct himself in public!" Heterogeneous Saunders, on such occasions, would proudly retort.

"The only danger is that some of the public is liable to sometimes get over-stimulated," Colonel Spilkins would reply whimsically, "and not conduct itself properly in regard to Perfect Alibi, in which case—— Well, Red Bluff would need a change of venue!"

"Personally," Chuck Roden, assistant chauffeur of the faro layout in Saloon Number Four, admitted, "when a polecat is wandering around my feet I always feel like something is liable to explode prematurely! I'll confess it makes it kind of hard to keep my mind on the cards!"

Perfect Alibi himself, cared nothing for public opinion.

## CHAPTER IX

### SOLEMN OBJECTS TO DIRTY SHIRT'S PLAN

It was in front of Wong Gee's restaurant that Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith first negotiated acquaintance with Perfect Alibi. The veteran and wealthy prospectors had only that evening returned from one of their frequent sojourns on the borders of Hellfire Basin, near the windswept slopes of Dead Angel Mountain, stopping, incidentally on their Red Bluffward way, at Hellbroth Oasis for a couple of days while they located a tentative tungsten prospect in a small cliff a hundred yards or so farther up in Sodamint Canyon.

Versus, having been unpacked and given her freedom, Solemn and Dirty Shirt—in search of recreation from a sustained diet of beans—stepped into Wong Gee's café to refresh themselves with the more diversified menu offered by the pleasant mannered Oriental.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt partook heartily of ham and eggs, reënforced with fried potatoes. After finishing their repast they remained at the table a few moments, chatting with Wong Gee and discussing the more serious plans of the evening which contemplated a series of diversional visits to Red Bluff's seven oases, the same to be made in consecutive order, beginning at Saloon Number One and ultimately arriving, if possible, at Saloon Number Seven.

Solemn suggested that they try a new method and start

operations in Saloon Number Seven, then work backward down the line. Dirty Shirt demurred on the grounds that it wasn't logical. The argument was still in progress as Solemn and Dirty Shirt arose to take their departure.

"It's just as easy to start at one end as it is at the other," Solemn persisted doggedly, his keen gray eyes flashing with earnestness. "Besides that, Saloon Number Seven is the closest and we won't lose so much time——"

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt exclaimed, interrupting Solemn's discourse as they stepped out into the street. "Looky yonder! What do you think of that?"

Solemn stopped suddenly; his look changing to one of apprehension.

Less than five yards away a polecat stood in their path and stared calmly, unblinkingly, at them.

Dirty Shirt stooped forward, picked up a rock, drew back his arm as if to hurl the missile at the polecat. Solemn gasped.

"For Gawd's sake, you old red-whiskered idiot," he cried excitedly, "don't you dare throw that rock at that polecat! Ain't you got any sense at all? Put it down!"

Dirty Shirt hesitated,

"What's the matter with you?" he asked plaintively. "Ain't I got a right to throw a rock at a polecat if I want to?"

"Not in my presence!" Solemn snapped. "Not while I'm near, you ain't got any right to throw any rock at any polecat that's as close as that one is— Put it down!" he repeated.

Dirty Shirt grudgingly dropped the rock.

Perfect Alibi—for it was none other—unmoved by the incident, still gazed curiously, wholly unembarrassed,

with no unfriendly interest at the two venerable prospectors.

"You're always objecting to my pleasure," Dirty Shirt complained rather pathetically. "Everything I ever start to do that gives me enjoyment, you protest against! All my life I've wanted to hit a polecat with a rock and see what would happen——"

"A man your age ought to know what would happen!" Solemn broke in impatiently. "The idea of wantin' to hit a polecat that's almost right under your nose with a rock!"

"Well," Dirty Shirt grinned, "I was just curious!"

"Your curiosity's going to make you mighty miserable some day, if you don't control it!" Solemn grunted contemptuously.

Dirty Shirt began to lose his temper; he felt that he had been deprived of his personal liberties, to some extent.

"Ain't a man got a right to experiment?" he asked.

"Not with a polecat!" Solemn flung back, as they moved away toward Saloon Number One. "Don't ever get foolish or familiar or make any unexpected motions around a polecat!"

Perfect Alibi headed down the street in the direction of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel. Mother Skillern was on the porch when Perfect Alibi paused at the foot of the steps. Old Bob lounged near by, also enjoying the twilight breezes.

Mother Skillern and Old Bob saw Perfect Alibi simultaneously. It was also Old Bob's first observation of Perfect Alibi. Since Angel, Wong Gee's ex-fighting rooster had ridden him home, Old Bob had taken little interest in events outside of the immediate and, it might be said, sheltering vicinity of Mother Skillern's hotel. Both Mother Skillern and Old Bob registered immediate

attention and in a measure agitation when Perfect Alibi appeared.

Old Bob wasn't certain that Perfect Alibi was a cat. But it was evident that he was not a dog. That was a cinch. Old Bob was lonesome; therefore, Old Bob would take a chance. He straightened up, humped his back, murmured an inquiring "Meow!" and started stiffly down the steps.

Perfect Alibi unconcernedly awaited Old Bob's arrival.

At that moment Mother Skillern's agitation became acute.

"Come back here, Bob, you old fool!" she cried anxiously. "Get back up on this porch— Good Lord, if they start to fight things will be ruined!"

But Old Bob and Perfect Alibi did not fight.

Instead of engaging in battle, polecat and tomcat seemed drawn together by some subtle bond of sympathy; possibly mutual loneliness. For more than an hour Old Bob and Perfect Alibi romped together in the street, while Mother Skillern, her heart filled with foreboding that something tragic was likely to happen at any moment, hoped against hope that Old Bob would not get so rough in his play as to cause Perfect Alibi to lose his good humor or give way to impulsive displeasure.

Old Bob finally escorted Perfect Alibi to the livery stable, and from that time on, Old Bob and Perfect Alibi were friends.

Heterogeneous Saunders often saw the queerly assorted pair scampering about in the moonlight, in the corral at the side of the livery barn. At such times Heterogeneous would shake his head dubiously and murmur:

"That looks suspicious to me; mighty peculiar!"

Henceforth, Perfect Alibi wandered at will through the street of Red Bluff, unmolested and unmolesting. Red

Bluff came to consider Perfect Alibi as a sort of civic asset; something unusual in the line of municipal attractions; an object of public interest to be admired plentifully but under no circumstances to be handled, and especially manhandled.

It is possible that the uncertainty of the hazard involved, when Perfect Alibi was present, intrigued the spirit of Red Bluff. Red Bluff instinctively rejoiced in the element of chance.

Furthermore, a loose polecat is a feature not every metropolis can boast. Red Bluff was conscious of her superiority in this respect, and Red Bluff got exaltation out of the proximity of Perfect Alibi that was not only unique, but absolutely plausible.

"Red Bluff is proud of her public polecat!" Colonel Spilkins declared enthusiastically to strangers who marveled at the sight of Perfect Alibi drifting, wholly at ease, along the street. "Not many metropolises have individual polecats! Even Los Angeles, for example, with all her cafeterias, civilization—and Hollywood in the background—ain't got nothing like Perfect Alibi to exhibit to the tourists who go there to ride around in the real estate excursion buses and ask one another where they are from! For that matter, neither does New York possess a personal polecat. She's got the Woolworth Building and Greenwich Village and a Bohemian atmosphere, but she ain't got any free and unlimited polecat!"

"She sure ain't!" Red Bluff, individually and collectively heartily endorsed. "Imagine a polecat in Pershing Square——"

"Or Perfect Alibi freelancin' along Fifth Avenue!"

Red Bluff enjoyed, with equal exhilaration, the strange but apparently sincere friendship between Old Bob and Perfect Alibi. The odd attachment, begun that first

night in front of Mother Skillern's hotel shortly after Dirty Shirt Smith wanted to hit Perfect Alibi with a rock, to see what would happen, did not diminish as the weeks and the days sped past. It grew, fraught though it was with unexpectedness, and flourished up to and long after the appearance in Red Bluff of Horace Duranto and his almost immediate undoing.

## CHAPTER X

### HORACE ARRIVES ON TIME

In childhood Horace Duranto was christened "Antonio Cinco Pesos de Los Diez Ciento Renigalotto," which was significant. Yet, even his parents seldom troubled to ejaculate any considerable portion of his name. "Tony" alone seemed sufficient to attract his attention.

It is a far jump from the south of Anacortes to the job of "bus boy" in the famous old Gonfarone Hotel, on the end of upper Macdougal Street, in the wonder city of New York, U. S. A. In spite of this, at almost the exact instant of his twenty-second birthday, Antonio, et cetera, made it.

The subsequent discovery of the Adonisesque young Antonio and his transmutation into "Horace Duranto," the fascinating he-Venus of the silver screen, is a matter of newspaper and billboard record. It was initiated and to an extent accomplished by the eminent cinema director, Baron Eric von Derlust, known to his intimates in Culver City as "Abie"—assisted to some degree by publicity experts and the generosity of editors in the matter of space on the dramatic pages of various newspapers.

Within six months, thanks to the last named, also to suitable brown eyes, a face adapted to photography, Indian-like torso, and lean flanks, Antonio, et cetera, Renigalotto had virtually forgotten that he was ever any-

thing but "Horace Duranto," adored, flattered and idolized by quite a circle of female patrons of the silent drama.

The sudden transition from sour claret at forty cents a quart to high velocity champagne, at twelve dollars a pint, is one that men of even the strongest powers of resistance may well contemplate with apprehension and a measure of dread. It is a critical experiment.

To Horace Duranto, however, it was merely an incident, the inevitable sequence of which was a green automobile with silver trimming, an unspeakable contempt for speed laws, and other ideas of similar texture. As such, Horace Duranto descended on the rapid metropolis of Red Bluff.

The last scenes of the tremendous super-sensation, *The Tented Harem of Allamagooza,* in which Horace Duranto was the inflexible Allamagooza himself, had to be shot where there was plenty of desert. Nowhere is there such a surplus of desert as in the vicinity of Red Bluff, the social and economic hub out in the midst of the southwestern penultimate of the splendid state of Nevada and rather proud of the fact that it was founded on borax and was, also, the possessor of Perfect Alibi, perhaps the only personal municipal polecat in existence.

No longer than the night before the coming of Horace Duranto to Red Bluff, Solemn Johnson, plus Dirty Shirt Smith, Colonel Spilkins, Heterogeneous Saunders and others, in the Seventh Oasis, had been discussing the charm a polecat of Perfect Alibi's attainments gave to a commercial center situated as Red Bluff was situated, in the midst of extravagant space and isolation.

"Red Bluff was lucky," Dirty Shirt Smith observed sententiously, "that I didn't hit that polecat with that rock that night! Perfect Alibi has got personality and——"

"You're the one that was lucky!" Solemn Johnson interrupted, scornfully.

"By the way," Colonel Spilkins questioned, turning to Heterogeneous Saunders, "are Old Bob and Perfect Alibi still fraternizing? I ain't seen them together much."

"They still affiliate," Heterogeneous replied; "Old Bob comes over to the barn or else Perfect Alibi sneaks down to the hotel about every day or evening. But for some reason Perfect Alibi is sort of peevish these days and sticks pretty close to home most of the time! I don't much like the way he acts. Sometimes I wonder if associatin' with Old Bob so much ain't about ruined that polecat's temper or something!"

"Reckon he's catchin' the hydrophobia?" some one asked.

"No, hardly that," Heterogeneous answered, "I just think he's been runnin' around with Old Bob till it's affected his disposition——"

"When a polecat's disposition is affected he's dangerous!" Colonel Spilkins broke in.

"A polecat's dangerous any time," Solemn Johnson declared, "and some folks"—he went on with withering sarcasm directed at Dirty Shirt Smith—"ain't got any more sense than to want to hit one with a rock—'just to see what would happen'!"

"Well, something would happen, all right, if they hit Perfect Alibi with anything the way he's actin' now!" Heterogeneous exclaimed. "I'm plumb uneasy about that polecat; he gets nasty if anybody even goes close to the hole where he lives!"

"He showed his teeth and shook his tail at me when I came past the livery stable this morning," Dirty Shirt grinned. "What's that the sign of?"

"You'd have found out, darned sudden, if you had hit him with a rock!" Solemn sneered.

"Maybe I ought to sell him," Heterogeneous suggested.

"No, indeed," Colonel Spilkins protested quickly. "Red Bluff needs that polecat! The friendship between Perfect Alibi and Old Bob is one of the most unusual and touching things I've ever witnessed. It shows the magnanimous spirit of each! Just let the public treat Perfect Alibi with consideration and Perfect Alibi ain't going to humiliate anybody. Besides which, he is a living reminder of the importance of people attending strictly to their own private business. Which recalls the fact that it's about time to have another drink, ain't it?"

Thus tactfully, Colonel Spilkins ended the discussion.

## CHAPTER XI

### GREEN WITH SILVER TRIMMINGS

It was warm the following afternoon when Horace Duranto stepped from the big green car with silver decorations, in front of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel. Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith lounged in the shade on the porch; Old Bob was curled up in the corner a few feet away; Mother Skillern appeared at the door as the beautiful speed annihilator came to a stop.

Horace Duranto surveyed his surroundings; his lips curled in a sneer of contempt. His first remark was a diplomatic error. He said:

"This is a hell of a layout to be stuck in for a week!"

A faint red shadow spread across Mother Skillern's cheeks; the pleasant smile tightened to a thin straight line; the good-natured twinkle in her still handsome blue eyes changed to a look of icy resentment.

Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith exchanged significant glances.

"Kind of important, ain't he?" each thought.

"And Eric von Derlust expects *me*, Horace Duranto, to hang out in this.—When him and the rest of them get here to-morrow, it ain't much I'll tell him" the seven-hundred-dollar-a-week camera hero continued. "Look at the 'hicks' smeared around," and Horace up-staged Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith witheringly. "The idea of anybody living in a—shack like this!

What are you old stiffs sittin' there for? Why don't you hustle my bags out of the car and give some service around here?"

Mother Skillern gasped audibly.

"Well, of all things——" Dirty Shirt began.

"Sh-hh-h!" Solemn hissed.

Dirty Shirt saw the look in Solemn's eyes. Without a word he followed Solemn out to the magnificent car.

The chauffeur loaded the veteran prospectors with luggage, and Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith—whose royalties from the borax mine across the gulch amounted to several times the princely and yet scarcely sufficient salary of the arrogant young autocrat who ordered them about—climbed humbly back on to the porch.

"Watch out how you handle them things!" Horace barked, as Solemn and Dirty Shirt deposited their burdens at the side of the door.

Solemn deliberately winked at Mother Skillern; Mother Skillern returned the wink and covered her mouth with her hand to hide a smile.

"Ain't you ever coming, Mazie?" Horace called fretfully to a ravishing feminine creature, hand-picked eyebrows and all, who had remained until then languidly reclining against the luxurious rear seat of the beautiful car.

"Oh, I sa'ay," the limpid voice endeavored to manipulate a combination of London, New York, south Tennessee and Los Angeles accents, "is this thuh place Horace, old deah? How peculiah! Rawther primitive, is it not, eh, what? I wondah, is theah a bawth in ouah apa'tment!"

One must admit that to be cast as one of Allamagooza's harem, also the temporary favorite of Horace Duranto, green car, and elegant silver trimmings, *et*

*cetera,* is quite a slide—one direction or the other—from the pie department of the Blue Prune Cafeteria, on Western Avenue, even in Culver City.

Mazie was making progress.

For the first time Mother Skillern spoke:

"Yeah, deahy," she drawled ironically, as Mazie glided, with a graceful side winding movement on to the porch, "theah's a bawth in youah apahtment. You'll find it on the commode in the corner; awnd if it isn't satisfawctory I'll have Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith bring Piute Hot Springs over to Red Bluff and we'll fix up one that's special"—under her breath and aside Mother Skillern exploded,—"like—*hell!* Lord forgive me!"

"Oh, what a lovely, large cawt!"

Mazie had discovered the hitherto unsuspected Old Bob.

"What a bootiful cattikins!" she gurgled rapturously, approaching the short tailed, unfeminine, brindle feline mascot of Mother Skillern's hotel. "Has her got some 'ittle tootsy kittenses—Mazie wants to pet 'ums!"

Old Bob stood up, backed away suspiciously and mewed threateningly. Solemn and Dirty Shirt blushed. Mother Skillern strangled, but managed to stammer:

"No, Old Bob ain't got nor—nor—ever had any 'kittenses' anybody has noticed!"

"Don't touch her, Mazie!" Horace cried, disdainfully. "She's just a common 'scrub cat!' About a half-breed!"

Mother Skillern flared up instantly.

"Old Bob a 'scrub cat,'" she snapped angrily. "Young man, I want you to understand that that cat ain't any scrub or half-breed cat! He is teetotal cat. And you can sneer at me and sneer at my hotel and sneer at Red Bluff, but you can't get away with any sarcasm about my cat!"

Horace's only answer was a shrug of his handsome shoulders.

"Oh, there's a bootifuller one!" Mazie cried ecstatically.

Perfect Alibi had decided to make an afternoon call on Old Bob; Old Bob had already started down the steps to meet him when Mazie noted the new arrival.

"That's the one Mazie wants!"

"Now there's a real cat!" Horace exclaimed, "I would say he's almost a perfect bred"— he hesitated for an instant—"a perfect bred—Persian!"

"Persian?" Mother Skillern repeated in astonishment. "That—a—a—Persian cat? Why it's a——"

"Certainly, he's a Persian cat!" Horace interrupted confidently, with dignity. "There are a great many of them in Hollywood, lots of my friends in the picture world have got cats like him. He is a full-blooded Persian!"

"Get him for me, Horace, old deah!" Mazie pleaded. "Please bring him up on the porch!"

"Excuse me," Dirty Shirt Smith interrupted, politely, "but we all thought Perfect Alibi was a pole——Ouch!"

Solemn Johnson punched Dirty Shirt violently with his elbow.

"Pole-Angus!" Solemn almost shouted to head off the sentence on Dirty Shirt's lips. "He's a Pole-Angus cat; that's what he is! It's a new breed Heterogeneous Saunders got from his cousin in—in—Egypt!"

A brilliant idea had come to Solemn. Mother Skillern and Dirty Shirt realized by Solemn's look and his tone that some scheme was maturing in his keen old brain. What it was neither could guess, but both were willing to coöperate to the limit.

"You are mistaken," Horace insisted, with Mencken-esque assurance, "that cat is a Persian——"

"Please go fetch him for Mazie," Mazie still coaxed, with innocent eagerness, "det 'im for 'ittle Maziekums!"

Such pleading was irresistible. Horace turned to Dirty Shirt Smith.

"Catch that Persian cat and bring him up to the lady!" he commanded.

"Well, of all——" Dirty Shirt began, drawing back.

"Don't you dare catch that pole—Pole-Angus cat, Dirty Shirt Smith!" Mother Skillern interposed, hastily. "I won't have him brought on to this porch!"

Perfect Alibi himself solved the problem by sniffing a couple of times at the rear tires of the wonderful automobiles, nosing Old Bob affectionately for a moment, whirling and with a saucy flirt of his tail darting nimbly down the street toward the livery stable.

Mazie stamped her dainty slipper-clad foot.

"Now he's gone," she pouted. "Mazie's mad, so she is!"

"Aw, cut it out, kid, fade out of it," Horace comforted. "I'll have him got for you yet! Let's go inside and see what kind of shake-down they've got for us in this joint!"

Mother Skillern and Mazie, followed by Horace, turned to enter the hotel. Solemn Johnson beckoned Horace slyly aside.

"Say, young feller," Solemn whispered, "I'll fix it so you can get the pole—pole-Angus cat for the lady! But it'll have to be arranged for to-night. Mother Skillern's kind of jealous and sensitive on account of Old Bob, so don't mention it to her; just keep still and we'll work out the details eventually!"

Horace beamed; Solemn's attitude was one of humble, almost suspiciously humble deference.

"Fine, my good man, fine!" Horace replied, magnanimously slipping a quarter into Solemn's hand. "I'll see

you this evening!" Then he marched majestically after Mazie and Mother Skillern.

Solemn leaned against the building, convulsed with silent laughter.

"My Gawd!" he choked. "My Gawd—Persian! A Persian cat! What a idiot!"

"What you schemin' to do?" Dirty Shirt asked.

For a moment Solemn did not answer.

"What you think you're plannin' to do, I asked you?" Dirty Shirt repeated impatiently.

"Never mind," Solemn answered, "wait till to-night! I'm going to satisfy your curiosity—and without you hitting Perfect Alibi with a rock, either! Come on, let's go over to Saloon Number Three and get a drink of sody or something. We got to be fortified!"

Dirty Shirt was willing, and they moved away toward the inviting hospitality of the Third Oasis.

## CHAPTER XII

### HORACE REALIZES HIS AMBITION

THE flaming sun had barely dipped behind the ragged summits of Tombstone Range; the shadows of evening were just flinging their velvety silence over the vast solitudes surrounding Dead Angel Mountain, Sodamint Canyon, Hellfire Basin, Arsenic Springs and the rest of the immutable desert covering the whole anticlimax of southwestern Nevada, and in which Red Bluff was the one small spot of human activity, aspirations, and achievements, when Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith again, a little furtively, sought the restful porch in front of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel.

Horace Duranto and the bewitching Mazie were already sitting in the large, rustic rocking chairs enjoying the cool breezes which rolled in gentle waves from the gulch and the borax mine. Mother Skillern was busy with executive matters within the hotel. Old Bob was curled up on the top step of the porch, his eyes turned expectantly down the street toward the livery stable.

Solemn Johnson went straight to the heart of his subject.

"Howdy!" he said. "Does the lady still want to get that—Pole-Angus cat?" he asked.

All afternoon Mazie had been making life unhappy for Horace with just that purpose in view.

"Yes," Horace replied sharply, "and I want him too!

No old hen running a bum rooming house can tell me what I can have in my room and what I can't!"

Solemn and Dirty Shirt smothered their wish to swear.

They felt like spanking this temperamental young temporary millionaire when he referred to Mother Skillern, Red Bluff's estimable and only hostess, as an "old hen."

Old Bob pricked up his ears and mewed.

Perfect Alibi, as if sent by fate, came carelessly around the corner of Wong Gee's café and headed for Mother Skillern's hotel. Solemn felt better; his plan was working.

"Oh, there he is now!" Mazie cried gleefully, catching sight of Perfect Alibi. "Get him for me, sweety!"

"You mustn't catch him here!" Solemn interposed quickly. "You—you see, he belongs to Heterogeneous Saunders, and Heterogeneous might come along any instant! If he did, and saw somebody trying to catch his pole—Pole-Angus cat"—Solemn himself almost tripped —"he'd be awful mad! But I got a scheme!"

Horace and Mazie leaned forward, listening eagerly.

"I'd catch him myself," Solemn went on, "or Dirty Shirt would——"

"Like hell he would!" Dirty Shirt interrupted.

"Shut up!" Solemn hissed. "Wait till I'm through.—Anyhow, ain't you got a damned bit of politeness, swearing that way in the presence of a lady?"

Dirty Shirt turned his face aside and grinned.

"I'd catch him, or Dirty Shirt would," Solemn continued hurriedly, fearful that Mother Skillern might appear, "but we both got a special engagement this evening, so it ain't feasible for us to catch him. But if the lady still wants him——"

"Well, I want him," Mazie cried petulantly, "and I'm going to have him! If Horace can't get me one little Persian cat——"

"Forget it, kid—don't worry. I'll get him for you!" Horace broke in.

"That's the stuff!" Solemn encouraged. "Now listen, and I'll tell you my scheme: Perfect Alibi won't stay here long; he'll soon go back to the den Heterogeneous has fixed up for him to live in under the livery barn. All you got to do is to go to the livery stable and wait. When Perfect Alibi comes back and starts to go into his hole—well, there he is—just help yourself! It's dead easy. Dirty Shirt and me will take you and show you where the hole is; after that, it's you and luck and Perfect Alibi for it!"

"Oh, do it, Horace, doodie!" Mazie cried, clapping her pink little hands with delight, "and I'll go with you!"

Solemn and Dirty Shirt looked uncertainly at each other; a little startled at Mazie's suggestion.

"I—I—don't believe, lady——" Dirty Shirt stammered.

Solemn stopped him.

"Why not?" he laughed. "It's a good idea—It will kind of make things—complete! Only," he added, to salve his conscience, "Perfect Alibi ain't used to women much and you mustn't stand too close when the—the—gentleman catches him. It might get him excited or something!"

Five minutes later Horace Duranto crouched beside the small hole about the size a badger would make, at the northeast corner of the livery stable; ten feet away Mazie stood against the side of the building and watched; both registered intense expectancy, eagerness, pleasurable anticipation.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt left them, standing and crouching thus, and hurried rapidly along the wide business street of Red Bluff; going in the opposite direction from where Horace and Mazie crouched and waited. In front

of Hop Sing's Chinese laundry, Solemn and Dirty Shirt met Perfect Alibi, speeding toward home; Old Bob was with him.

"Let's see if we can make it to Saloon Number Four," Solemn exclaimed. "We ought to get as far away as possible and still have some sort of shelter!"

The two venerable prospectors broke into a trot.

Panting from their exertions, their faces flushed, their eyes sparkling with excitement, they paused at the entrance of the Fourth Oasis and looked back.

Perfect Alibi, ten feet ahead of Old Bob, was just turning the corner of the livery stable.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt rushed to the bar.

"Whisky, straight, Billy—two of them! Quick!" they gasped.

At one swift motion Solemn and Dirty Shirt disposed of the stimulant.

"Do it again!" they murmured, leaning heavily against the bar, scarcely breathing, so great was the mental tension.

There was a moment of ominous silence; but for only a moment.

"My Gawd!" Chuck Roden, assistant chauffeur of the faro department of Saloon Number Four, and who was standing near the front door, exclaimed suddenly, clasping his hand to his nostrils. "My Gawd! Oh, good Lord!" Chuck repeated.

"My Gawd!" others present, cried.

"My Gawd!" Solemn and Dirty Shirt echoed, imitating the motions Chuck had made.

"My Gawd! *Horace has caught him!*"

It was true.

A bob-tailed cat dashed madly down the street toward Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel; his name was Old Bob. Close on his heels ran a young man and

a young lady, hand in hand, and reeling as they ran.

Not long thereafter a magnificent green automobile, with silver trimmings, roared out across the desert, speeding like a demon through the starlit night, leaving Red Bluff far—as far as possible—behind, and none in Red Bluff knew where it was going; but all, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, Colonel Spilkins, Mother Skillern, the entire two-hundred-and-seven-population and even Versus, Solemn and Dirty Shirt's faithful mouse-colored burro, knew *why* it departed.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt rested but little that night.

And the following day, with most of the rest of Red Bluff, Solemn and Dirty Shirt assembled in the Seventh Oasis. Heterogeneous Saunders rushed, wild-eyed, into the place. He called for a drink; with trembling hand raised the glass to his lips.

"What's the matter?" Colonel Spilkins asked anxiously.

"Come here to the door," Heterogeneous replied. "Come to the door and—see——"

The crowd surged to the front.

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt Smith whispered in awe.

"My Gawd!" Solemn Johnson gasped, and could say no more.

Marching sedately down the street came Perfect Alibi; in the rear, trailed seven little "Alibis"; some of them black, some of them brindle, all of them uttering faint kittenish squeals that sounded like "meow!" Old Bob sat on the top step of the hotel porch; unblushingly, with an air of utter ennui, he watched the procession approach.

## CHAPTER XIII

### GETTING DARKER

It was dusk; almost a year to the day after the peculiar and unexpected undoing of Horace Duranto and the surprising revelation of the odd and unusual domestic relationships of Perfect Alibi, Red Bluff's favorite polecat.

A vagrant breeze fitfully fanned the sultry air, its gentle breath a gesture of relief from the heat and glare of a day in late July. Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith again sat on the steps of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel. Occasionally they gazed at the borax mine, across the gulch, which they themselves owned and from which they received a steady and almost unbelievably ample stream of royalties.

"It's getting darker!" Dirty Shirt murmured idly.

Solemn Johnson knew it was getting darker and did not answer. His gray eyes were turned toward the fading bulk of Dead Angel Mountain, on the edge of Hellfire Basin, far to the northeast. As he looked, an expression of melancholy settled over Solemn's face; slowly, thoughtfully, despondently he chewed his tobacco.

Finally Solemn spoke.

"Somehow, I sort of dread it," he muttered, a note of weariness in his voice, "—'tis getting darker, ain't it!"

"Dread what?" Dirty Shirt asked, looking around.

"That trip we're starting on out to Dead Angel Mountain, to-morrow.—Wonder if my eyes are failin'?" Solemn answered.

Dirty Shirt plucked uneasily at his red whiskers.

"Have you got a—a—'persentiment'?" he asked anxiously.

Solemn slowly measured his words before replying.

"I don't know the 'sickology' of it——" he began.

"P-sy-chology," Dirty Shirt corrected.

Resentment flared in Solemn's eyes.

"I wisht to Gawd you'd never got that dictionary," he retorted impatiently. "Ever since that infernal book agent sold it to you, you've been trying to teach me to pronounce words that I pronounced successful before he was ever born!"

"Well, p-sy-'s right——" Dirty Shirt started to argue.

"P-sy—p-sick—or p-sock——" Solemn interrupted fretfully, "the 'ology' of it ain't vital! All I know is, I just get a kind of squeamish feelin' inside of me when I think of it!"

For half an hour there was silence.

The shadows deepened. The lights from Red Bluff's seven saloons streamed from windows and doors and threw inviting splashes of illumination into the dusty street.

Like a giant newly minted coin, the full moon pushed itself above the eastern rim of the earth, seemed to pause, then leap upward into a perfect yellow disk, as bright and shining as hammered Mexican gold.

Without comment, yet appreciatively, Solemn and Dirty Shirt watched the splendid birth of another gorgeous, romantic desert night. From the top of Slaughter House Hill, overlooking Rattlesnake Canyon, the shrill yelp of a coyote suddenly pierced the brooding stillness.

"Sounds like Joshua," Solemn muttered absently.

Dirty Shirt looked in astonishment at Solemn. He knew, and he knew Solemn knew, that it *was* Joshua, Red Bluff's three-legged, half-domesticated coyote that had given tongue to the clear, high C soprano-like notes.

"Not only sounds like Joshua, but 'tis Joshua." Dirty Shirt answered, petty annoyance in his voice. "As many times as you've heard that coyote yelp, it looks like you'd reckonize him without unnecessary remarks!"

"Well, it did sound like him!"

" 'Tis him, I told you!" Dirty Shirt retorted sharply.

Solemn sighed, and was silent.

A moment later the sonorous, beseeching bray of a burro suddenly shattered the calm serenity that had settled over the scene.

"Sounds like Versus," Solemn murmured, looking up the street.

Viciously, Dirty Shirt bit off a chew of tobacco.

"It not only sounds like Versus," he snapped, "but it absolutely is Versus! Any darned fool ought to know our own mouse-colored burro's bray. She's up at Saloon Number Seven, nickerin' for Jeff to give her a bucket of beer——"

"Jeff ain't on duty to-night at Saloon Number Seven," Solemn broke in, "Ed's on duty!"

"Well, then—nickerin' for Ed to give her a bucket of beer!"

There was another interlude of silence.

Solemn broke it.

"Seems to me her voice was hoarse," he observed gently.

"Most burros' voices is hoarse!" Dirty Shirt flung back. "Versus ain't no exception to the general rule."

"Reckon she's getting kind of old," Solemn remarked pensively. "Must be awful to have to—tell everything just by *sound,*" he added, seemingly irrelevantly.

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed. "Who ever heard of a burro gettin' old?"

"Burros get old—same as everything," Solemn replied quietly. "They can't help it no more than anything else can!"

"Versus has been packing our stuff around over this hell-blisterin' old desert for twenty-five years, or longer," Dirty Shirt sneered, "and as far as I can see, she ain't a danged bit older than she ever was!"

"Versus is gettin' old," Solemn repeated, "and"—as a sudden, whimsical thought possessed his mind—"she's entitled to a vacation!"

Dirty Shirt laughed derisively.

"Versus is entitled to a vacation," Solemn went on, not heeding Dirty Shirt's mirth. "She's gettin' old, and she needs some diversion. When we go on this trip to-morrow, she's going to stay right here in Red Bluff and live a life of luxury, instead of packin' our cussed outfit wearily across the blazing heat of the desert; she's going to stay right here and escape the blindin' glare of the——"

"That's got to be figured out," Dirty Shirt interrupted; "just keep it in your consciousness that Versus is half mine!"

"It'll be figured," Solemn answered laconically.

The musical jingle of freight-bells interrupted the argument; the rattle of wagons, nearing Red Bluff, on the Barstow road, could be heard. Above the lighter tinkling of the smaller bells, there sounded the heavier, deeper-toned clang of a cowbell. For a moment Solemn and Dirty Shirt listened.

"Sounds like Tom Shannon's outfit," Solemn observed, "all exceptin' that cowbell ringing."

With unconcealed impatience Dirty Shirt looked at Solemn.

"It not only sounds like Tom Shannon's outfit, but it also undoubtedly, teetotally is Tom Shannon's outfit!" he exclaimed. "And you're experienced enough," he added, "that you ought to know it!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE GAMBLE HORSE

As Dirty Shirt Smith finished speaking, an eight-horse, two-wagon freight outfit swung up out of Rattlesnake Canyon, at the foot of Slaughter House Hill, headed along Red Bluff's wide, single, one-sided street toward Heterogeneous Saunders' livery stable at the farthermost end of the thoroughfare. Solemn and Dirty Shirt watched the heavy, leg-weary team shuffle slowly past the porch of Mother Skillern's hotel.

A white horse, not prepossessing in appearance, was tied to the rear end of the trail wagon; from a strap about the horse's neck a cowbell was swinging.

"His wagons rattle empty," Dirty Shirt observed.

Solemn Johnson did not reply. His thoughts were on the white horse, stumbling along in the dust. From the looks of the animal, Solemn knew it was not such as Tom Shannon would use in a heavy freighting outfit.

"I said," Dirty Shirt repeated, "that Tom's wagons rattled empty—like he didn't have much of a load of back-freight."

Solemn still sat, musingly silent, and scratched his chin.

"Well, I hope he brought them two barrels of Bourbon that Ed said he ordered for Saloon Number Seven," Dirty Shirt continued. "They're mighty nigh out up there!"

Even this brought no response from Solemn.

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt snorted. "Ain't it possible for you to get up any interest in anything to-night?"

"I'm thinkin'!"

"Well, just because you get a spell of thinkin' on you," Dirty Shirt snapped, "ain't any reason why you can't pay attention to what people are sayin' when they're trying to talk!"

Solemn arose slowly from the steps.

"Versus is going to have a vacation!" he muttered.

"Ain't you over that sentiment yet?" Dirty Shirt asked impatiently, also rising.

"I ain't. She's goin' to have it."

"The idea!" Dirty Shirt exploded. "The dog-gone fool idea of a burro—a dog-gone burro—needing a vacation! It's ridiculous, 'unconsistent'! Besides, Versus don't need a vacation. She's been vacatin' ever since I've been acquainted with her; and in the second place, it's just as beneficial for Versus to get out in the desert, away from Red Bluff, occasionally, and unabsorb some of the beer she's been absorbin' as it is for us to get out once in a while and unsoak the whisky we've been a-soakin'! And, ultimately," Dirty Shirt went on, "there ain't another pack-burro in Red Bluff, in which event, if Versus don't pack our outfit, who in Sam Hill is goin' to pack it?"

"Providence provides," Solemn answered quietly, as they stepped into Saloon Number Four.

A few moments later, Tom Shannon, as a prelude to supper in Wong Gee's café, next door, also entered the Fourth Oasis.

"See you brung along an extra horse, Tom," Solemn remarked casually. "Where'd you pick him up?"

"It ain't him; it's *her,*" Tom answered good-naturedly. "I met Bob Reavis on the Pimento-Barstow cut-off; Bob had her, and I shot craps with him for her and

won her, so I brung her along. Bob got her from Lafe Sawyers, over the other side of Resurrection Ridge. They played seven-up for her, and Bob had to take her; Lafe acquired her from some gipsies that brung her from beyond Dead Angel Mountain.—He drawed straws for her! She's a *'gamble horse,'* " Tom finished, with a laugh. "The gipsies told Lafe she was."

"She's a what?"

"A 'gamble horse.' It's bad luck to get rid of her, except by takin' a chance and gamblin' her off!"

"What's her specialty?" Solemn asked.

"Seems to be a ex-pack horse," Tom replied. "You want to own her?"

Dirty Shirt Smith suddenly sensed danger.

His shouted "No!" and Solemn's "Yes!" were simultaneous.

Tom chuckled.

"We'll flip a nickel for her," he said to Solemn, taking a five-cent piece from his pocket and shaking it between his cupped palms.

"All right," Solemn laughed, "how much have I got to put up against her?"

"Nothin'!" Tom grinned. "If you call it she's yours, and if I call it, I lose. I'll take heads!"

"Ain't anything left for me, then, I reckon, but tails!" Solemn laughed back, "so I guess I'll take 'em!"

Solemn knew that Tom carried—for amusement, rather than profit—a nickel with a buffalo on each side of it. Tom flipped the coin on to the bar.

"Tails it is!" he exclaimed. "She's yours!"

"I had a feelin' I was going to win that horse," Solemn murmured drolly.

"I had a feelin' you was, too!" Tom replied slyly.

Dirty Shirt Smith watched the performance with disgust.

"Now, I reckon——" he began, glaring at Solemn.

"Now, I reckon," Solemn interrupted, grinning and laying a bill on the bar, "it's customary for the winner to set 'em up!"

" 'Tis usual," Tom replied, as the crowd lined up, "and maybe one more won't hurt me; but it'll probably mean a double shot of ham an' eggs. One makes an appetite, two puts a razor edge on it, and three kills it!"

"I reckon——" Dirty Shirt began again.

"I reckon," Solemn broke in once more, "that Versus' vacation is provided for!"

"With that old white horse?" Dirty Shirt sneered.

"With she!"

Dirty Shirt switched his mode of attack.

"Well, of all things!" he sneered again, witheringly, "Who ever heard of a darned old yaller-whiskered idiot winnin' a horse sight-an'-unseen? Without even knowing her name. The chances are she ain't as much as got one!" he finished with a glare at Tom.

"Dirty Shirt, tut, tut!" Colonel Spilkins broke in reprovingly. "I'm surprised——"

"So'm I, totally!" Dirty Shirt grunted.

"I'm surprised," Colonel Spilkins went on in simulated reproach, "that you'd insinuate Tom could be so unsquare as to take advantage of Solemn and gamble a horse off on him that didn't even have a name. What is her name, anyhow, Tom?"

"*Justice!*"

"What!" Dirty Shirt exploded. "The impudence of namin' a danged old white horse *Justice!*"

Colonel Spilkins himself was rather surprised, and Solemn Johnson began to experience an uneasy feeling.

"It's suitable," Tom replied with studied carelessness. "Her name's 'Justice,' all right!"

" 'Suitable'!" Dirty Shirt repeated. "What's suitable

about naming a horse, and 'specially a pack horse, and a white horse, maybe even a sway-back horse, 'Justice'?"

Tom winked at Chuck Roden, who was tending bar, and started toward the door.

"It fits"— he said laconically—"she's blind!"

Solemn flinched, but was game.

"Well, I won her," he muttered, "and, by gosh, I'll—we'll keep her, temporarily, anyhow! Reckon the bell goes with her?" he called after Tom as the latter reached the door.

"Sure!" Tom laughed.

"Sure—the bell goes with her!" Dirty Shirt mimicked. "In addition to her other disagreeable features, she's probably hard to catch, and she has to wear a bell, so you can tell where she's at!"

"You're wrong, Dirty Shirt," Tom flung back with another laugh, "she has to wear the bell so she can hear it ringin' and keep cases on where she is at herself!"

The crowd roared.

Solemn looked gloatingly at Dirty Shirt. Dirty Shirt flushed.

"Now," Solemn chortled, "I reckon it's somebody else's time to set 'em up!"

Dirty Shirt laid a bill on the bar.

## CHAPTER XV

### "WHO LEFT MY PANTS ON LAST NIGHT?"

SOME hours thereafter, having successfully negotiated a complete circuit of all seven of Red Bluff's invitations to inebriation, and having impartially distributed their patronage there among, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith wended their way—at least with commendable persistence—toward their cozy shack, nestling snugly against the sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four.

Rounding the southeast corner of Wong Gee's café, they unexpectedly discovered Versus, their patient mouse-colored burro, quietly chewing a chunk of bacon rind which she had, evidently but a moment before, retrieved from the garbage box beside the back door of the restaurant.

The moon had long since passed the zenith of its orbit, and was now well on its way down the western slope of its arc, and nearing the giant, tumbled peaks of Tombstone Range which formed the horizon. A serene calm, broken only at times by the low song of a night bird, or the faint sweet chirp of some late-prowling horntoad, rested like a benediction upon the two-hundred-and-seven-population metropolis of Red Bluff and the expansive, imperishable desert adjacent.

Stirred deeply by his emotions, Solemn stepped quickly

forward and flung one arm affectionately over Versus' shaggy grizzled neck.

Dirty Shirt barely noticed Versus. In mute, enthralled adoration, his brown eyes were turned upward toward the silvery moon which hung like a pendant pearl, in the silent sky above him.

For a moment the tableau endured.

"Poor little Versus," Solemn murmured, "she's gettin' old, and she's entitled to a vacation. And Solemn Johnson never squashed a centipede," he went on, glancing defiantly at Dirty Shirt, "if she ain't goin' to get it; in spite of all the red-whiskered, darned old sand-shufflers here or hereafter!"

Dirty Shirt seemed not to hear.

"She's goin' to have her vacation——" Solemn began, caressingly again.

"She's—nervoush, ain'sh she?" Dirty Shirt broke in, his eyes still gazing upward at the moon.

"That's one reason," Solemn replied, without looking around, "why she's entitled to a vacation!"

It dawned on Dirty Shirt, then, that Solemn was speaking of Versus, while he, Dirty Shirt, was absorbed in a more poetic theme.

"Well, for gosh shake!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, resentful that his esthetic mood had been shattered. "Are you—shtill on thash va—vashakin'—su'ject? I didn't meansh—her," jerking his head toward Versus; "I meansh—*her!*" motioning with his arm to the moon. "She's goin'—roundsh an' roundsh—thash way, ain'sh she?" Dirty Shirt finished, illustrating his argument with a swinging movement of his hand from left to right.

Solemn despised intemperance, as did Dirty Shirt—usually.

"It's time you was in bed!" Solemn grunted disgustedly, removing his arm from Versus' neck and start-

ing toward their cabin. Dirty Shirt followed, mumbling argumentatively.

"Well, she—ish—movin'! Strangesh p-shy-k'llogishk shenomenish I—I—ever—shaw!"

A little later, Solemn and Dirty Shirt entered their tiny home. Versus, looking wistfully after them, stood in the soft, bewitching moonlight, and silently chewed her bacon rind.

The sun was well up, Red Bluff astir, the daily grind of business and social activity well in progress, when Dirty Shirt Smith, as in a dream—for he was still semi-asleep—seemed to hear the slow, measured clanging of a cowbell. The illusion, if illusion it was, Dirty Shirt thought was drawing nearer. It came to the side of the cabin; stopped for an instant and then, as Justice—Solemn Johnson's acquisition of the night before, and which he had only that moment led over from the livery stable—nervously shook her head, the metallic clamor volleyed forth with the startling suddenness and vigor of the first movement in a well organized charivari in south Missouri.

Dirty Shirt sat up suddenly.

"What in Sam Blazes!" he yelled.

Solemn Johnson stepped into the room.

"Get up!" Solemn ordered. "While you're gettin' breakfast, I'll be gettin' the outfit together and as soon as we've et we'll load Justice up and start!"

Dirty Shirt swung his feet off the bed and glanced down; a bewildered, half-ashamed expression clouded his brown eyes, as he looked at his feet and legs:

"Who in the *hell* left my shoes and pants on last night?" he queried plaintively.

Solemn's lips curled contemptuously.

"Get up," he repeated sternly, ignoring Dirty Shirt's question, "and get breakfast while I fix Justice!"

"My Gawd!" Dirty Shirt broke in angrily. "You ain't serious about taking that darned old blind ghost, instead of Versus, be you?"

"I be! Get up, I said!"

Dirty Shirt climbed out of bed; stood unsteadily for a moment, trying to get his bearings and assemble some sort of argument—yet, he knew in advance it would be fruitless—to dissuade Solemn from his sudden and absurd idea that Versus needed a vacation. Dirty Shirt could see no reason at all for using a strange, unknown, blind, white pack horse for their trip to Dead Angel Mountain instead of their own mouse-colored, faithful, even if at times erratic Versus.

"Get breakfast!" Solemn ordered again.

Dirty Shirt's head ached. He decided to await a more favorable opportunity, when his mental faculties had been cleared by a cup of coffee, at least, before attempting to convince Solemn that his scheme to substitute Justice for Versus was unfeasible.

Not until breakfast was finished, and Solemn was putting the pack on Justice, was anything more said of the matter. Versus stood near, curiously watching Solemn settle the pack-saddle on the back of the blind white horse. Dirty Shirt leaned against the door, glaring.

"Hand me them blankets!" Solemn snapped, nodding his head toward a roll of bedding by the side of the door.

Dirty Shirt made no move to obey.

Instead, he flared into action, deciding it was time to strike.

"Look here!" he snapped back. "This darned thing has gone far enough, and——"

Solemn cut him off.

"She's goin' farther, a danged sight.—Hand 'em!"

Dirty Shirt obeyed, grumbling:

"Of all the idiotic, dog-gone, fool, dadgummed,

double-cussed, unbelievable freaks of the imagination, this insane complex for usin' that old 'antiquicated' congregation of hide and bones and blindness to pack our outfit on, instead of Versus, who's been doin' it steady ever since anybody can remember and knows how, is the worst I ever read about!"

"Justice ain't so 'antiquicated,'" Solemn flung back, "but what's she's capable, and as far as I can see, willin' to be a darned suitable pack horse."

"She's blind——"

"'Tain't her fault!"

"She's sway-backed!"

"'Tain't her fault—anyhow, it's an advantage; it makes the pack-saddle fit snugger!"

"She'll fall down and bu'st everything. I wouldn't trust my fiddle to be packed on her!"

"Then pack your damn fiddle your ownself!" Solemn barked.

Dirty Shirt felt that he had slipped and paused for a moment.

He thought of a new opening:

"Somebody'll have to lead her!" he growled.

"Somebody's goin' to lead her!" Solemn shot back.

"'Twon't be me—I'll shoot her first!" The instant the words were out of his mouth Dirty Shirt realized that he had taken in too much territory.

Solemn's gray eyes went hard and cold.

"You just try shootin' her!" he challenged. "Just try it.—Furthermore," he went on, a note of finality in his voice, "we're partners. We split on royalties from the borax mine; we've split in the past, and we'll split in the future—and we'll split in the present, about leadin' Justice! I'll lead her my half; you'll lead her your half and that settles th' proposition, definite!"

It was grim, inexorable pronouncement. Dirty Shirt

knew it, yet he hated to yield. There was nothing else he could think of at the moment, about which they could argue.

"Oh, well," he grumbled, hedging reluctantly, "maybe I won't exactly shoot her—but danged if I wouldn't like to!"

With the pack firmly on Justice's back, Solemn picked up the lead rope and started down the slope toward Rattlesnake Canyon, up which they would journey till they headed for Arsenic Springs, thence north by northeast across the open, blinding, heat-swept desert to Dead Angel Mountain.

"I'll lead her to-day. To-morrow, you lead her!" Solemn announced.

Dirty Shirt smothered an oath and swung sullenly into stride beside Solemn.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE START TO DEAD ANGEL MOUNTAIN

Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, with blind white Justice, walked slowly yet steadily. Versus watched them go, her long ears thrust forward, her big expressive brown eyes filled with surprise and wonder, as if she tried vainly to figure out by what right this strange white, blind, pack horse was packing the pack which she felt had come to be almost a part of herself. A hurt look came into her eyes. She was being cruelly left behind; she felt that she had been cast aside. She gazed unhappily after Solemn and Dirty Shirt and Justice.

The trio rounded the corner of Saloon Number One and turned into the wide, one-sided street of Red Bluff. With sudden determination, Versus shuffled along on their trail.

At the dip into Rattlesnake Canyon, Solemn glanced back and saw Versus following them. He stopped and waited until she came near, then gently tried to shoo her back.

"Go on home, Versus," Solemn commanded softly. "You're havin' a vacation now. All you got to do, this time, is stay in Red Bluff and drink beer, and chew gunny sacks and bacon rinds, to your heart's content.—*Shoo!* Go on back!"

Dirty Shirt snorted contemptuously.

Versus refused to "shoo"; she stood wide-eyed and looked pleadingly at Solemn.

" 'Go on home, Versus!' " Dirty Shirt mimicked spitefully. "Go on home! Papa Solemn and Uncle Dirty Shirt's got another 'ittle tootsy-wootsy, danged old blind bell-ringin' playmate!"

Solemn more than flushed a dull red; he grew purple-red.

"If you wasn't already so darned old," he snapped wickedly at Dirty Shirt, "I'd kill you for those damned remarks!"

Dirty Shirt chuckled in sardonic glee. Solemn turned and again started forward. Close on his heels, Versus followed.

Once more Solemn stopped. He had to admit that he was puzzled. Versus seemed determined to upset his plan for her to have a vacation.

"She don't want any vacation," Dirty Shirt laughed, rejoicing in Solemn's dilemma; "it would break her old heart if she didn't go along like she's always done."

"Maybe there's something in that," Solemn conceded, "so, she can go along—if she wants to—but she's still on a vacation, just the same!"

Dirty Shirt suddenly had an inspiration.

"Did it ever occur to you," he said, facing Solemn, "that a pack horse has got to have more feed than a pack burro has? That miserable old blind white imitation of a four-footed Swiss bell-ringer will starve to death out on Dead Angel Mountain, while Versus, bein' a burro, would thrive and stay fat and rosy-cheeked and joyful on cactus, Joshua bark, and occasionally a plate of beans or two!"

Solemn knew that Dirty Shirt was making an air-tight case. But Solemn instantly matched his argument.

"You stay here," he said, handing the lead rope to Dirty Shirt, "and hold Justice. I'll take Versus back to the livery stable, borrow a pack-saddle, and get a sack or two of oats for her to stroll along under if she's bound to go with us. That way she can still be on her vacation, and while she's on it take some extra rations along for Justice too!"

Dirty Shirt groaned, and surrendered.

A half-hour later, Solemn, leading Justice; Dirty Shirt trudging grudgingly beside him, and Versus, contentedly swinging along under a burden of a hundred and fifty pounds of oats for Justice to eat, disappeared up the winding and tortuous chasm of Rattlesnake Canyon.

Night came. The quartet camped at Arsenic Springs.

Dawn came. The quartet moved onward, braving the flaming, blinding heat of the desert.

There came another night; another day, and still another, and at twilight Solemn and Dirty Shirt, Justice and Versus, reached their destination and were camped well up on the slope of Dead Angel Mountain, at the higher edge of a little mesa which Solemn and Dirty Shirt, on a previous visit—because they had seen one there—had named "Ground Hog Flat."

The camp was pitched where a tiny spring seeped bravely from the foot of the more abrupt mountainside. A pair of Joshua trees found life possible, there, from the moisture supplied by the spring; some willows, a few bunches of greasewood, and, at the uppermost margin of the damp area, one lone yucca added to the oasislike charm of the place.

On the flat below the camp, scattering tufts of salt-grass struggled desperately to clothe, with a harsh and wiry covering, the nakedness of the greasy-brown, alkali-impregnated adobe on which it grew. To the south, a quarter of a mile away, was a deep, sloping, sandy-sided

gorge in which some dozen gnarled and twisted piñons valiantly fought for life. This gorge, Solemn and Dirty Shirt had explored before; it was here that Dirty Shirt acquired his famous racing horntoad, Edith. For this reason, Solemn and Dirty Shirt had christened the little canyon "Horntoad Holler."

A mile to the north of the camp, its forbidding depths filled with black, hogback, basaltic dykes and curious, ill-shapen boulders of other volcanic creations; its sides walled with crumbling, treacherous, weather-eroded ledges and cliffs of shale and similar chalky formations, was Hydrophobia Gulch. It was a place of horror; mystery and death; a weird and yawning abyss; a ghastly gash in the earth, extending from near the summit of Dead Angel Mountain down to its widened mouth, from which the slow waste of the centuries spewed into and over Hellfire Basin.

Staked out on Ground Hog Flat, Justice browsed contentedly on the scant but nutritious tufts of grass which—although sightless, and guided only by the feel of the rope with which she was tethered—she occasionally found. Justice felt, intuitively, that in Solemn Johnson she had found a friend; and even in the profane and vociferous Dirty Shirt Smith, she detected a subtle, oath-concealed sympathy which a less sensitive consciousness would not, perhaps, have recognized or discovered.

And, although Dirty Shirt frequently swore at her, sneered at her, made fun of her, the dried prunes which he surreptitiously and benevolently fed to her, without Solemn Johnson's knowledge, strengthened Justice's belief that he was not wholly her enemy.

Versus appreciated her vacation. She lounged indolently and freely about the camp; gnawing at will on the bark of the Joshua trees, nosing among the cooking utensils for chunks of bacon rind or, if the whim possessed

her, standing for hours, motionless or nearly so, beside the mild and gentle-mannered Justice.

At first, Versus was jealous of Justice; but she soon overcame the narrow, petty emotion. She saw life from a broader, more tolerant, less mid-Victorian or Puritanical point of view, and she came to realize that it was unfair for her to wish to monopolize all of Solemn and Dirty Shirt's time and attentions; that it was their right, if they so desired, to have other affections and interests. So, ere long, the noble, unselfish little mouse-colored burro acquired a sincere fondness for the blind white pack horse, the bell she wore, and particularly the partly chewable leather strap with which the bell was fastened to Justice's neck.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt themselves relaxed completely.

## CHAPTER XVII

### SOLEMN HEARS A COWBELL

THE splendid quiet, the soothing solitude of Dead Angel Mountain refreshed and rested the simple, Red Bluff-weary, and in a way, childlike souls of Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt spent their days, or more properly speaking, fragments of them, in digging a location shaft six feet long by four feet wide and, as the mining laws required, ultimately to be ten feet deep. It was not that they desired or had any expectations of a possible mineral discovery; but merely because it was a good place—a dozen or so rods from camp—to 'experiment' as Solemn said.

They dug intermittently and while they dug they quarreled cheerfully, consistently concerning Justice. Dirty Shirt's antipathy for the blind, white, "gamble" pack horse, which really proved to be a sturdy, kindly-dispositioned creature, seemed to increase as the days and nights went by.

In the evening, Solemn and Dirty Shirt after their supper would lie by the smoldering embers of the campfire, chew tobacco, argue and counter-argue about Justice until the rhythmic clang of the bell she wore lulled them to sleep.

So passed two such idyllic weeks.

Then came the morning when it was Solemn's day to

work down in the prospect hole; the same being by now all of eight feet in depth. Solemn, having eased himself down by holding to Dirty Shirt's hands while the latter leaned over the side of the shaft and supported him, called back to Dirty Shirt:

"Drop that canteen of water down. After which, while I'm drillin' for this next shot, you'd better go over to Horntoad Holler and see if you can't find a piñon pole long enough to make a lug for me to climb out on."

"All right," Dirty Shirt acquiesced, "I kind of wanted to go over there anyhow, and see if I mightn't run across some of Edith's relations!"

As Dirty Shirt turned away, Solemn shouted:

"Be sure Justice is staked good and safe before you leave. I don't want her strayin' around loose while I'm down in this hole."

Unwittingly, Solemn had put the germ of a hellish idea in Dirty Shirt's always willing mind. As Solemn's request came to his ears, a sudden fiendish light came into his eyes and a grin, which it was well that Solemn did not see, came to Dirty Shirt's lips.

"Don't worry," he replied, carelessly, "Justice'll probably keep her balance till I get back!"

"Well, just be good and sure her stake's drove in solid!" Solemn yelled.

Without answering, Dirty Shirt stalked away.

For half an hour Solemn pounded indifferently on the steel drill; resting frequently in the shade of the perpendicular wall of the narrow, gravelike hole. At such times Solemn listened to the far-away sound of Justice's bell, and smiled contentedly to himself. During one of these rest periods it suddenly seemed to Solemn that the sound of the cowbell was becoming clearer. At first he thought it was the wind carrying the tones toward him. He listened intently. The bell rang a few meas-

ured times, as if Justice was walking; then it stopped for a moment of silence. Again there came a half-dozen regular, rhythmic strokes of the bell. This was repeated until Solemn was convinced that Justice was groping her way, unguided and unrestrained, through the eternal darkness in which she dwelt. And she undoubtedly was coming toward the shaft!

"My gosh!" Solemn muttered uneasily, "that danged horse *is* loose—and headed this way!"

Solemn stood rigid, peered upward, held his breath and listened; again he heard the cowbell drawing nearer, still nearer to the prospect hole.

Solemn's immediate dominant emotion was anger.

"That blamed old, red-whiskered, consarned—contrary—idiot of a Dirty Shirt Smith has gone off and left Justice loose!" he growled savagely. "And no tellin' where she'll go or what she'll do!"

But Solemn's rage quickly changed to fear. Even as he spoke, he had a conviction that Justice, in her pitiful blindness, would wander up to the shaft and fall in. Such a contingency would be tragedy of the most unpleasant sort.

Solemn well knew that a hole four feet wide, six feet long, eight feet deep was never intended to hold, comfortably, a man and a horse at the same time; particularly and especially in this instance Justice and himself. He shuddered at the thought. Solemn was by no means devoid of imagination. Indeed it was easy—too easy—for him to vision what would happen should Justice, weighing approximately twelve hundred pounds, fall into the shaft and, of course, on top of him. And by now Solemn was convinced that Justice would do exactly that thing; not intentionally, certainly not, nor by premeditated design, but as an inevitable sequence to Dirty Shirt Smith's going away and leaving her loose.

Once started, Solemn's imagination worked swiftly, expertly.

He saw himself, in a mental picture, squashed, mashed, flattened, squeezed, wedged tightly in the bottom of the location hole; on top of him, Justice in her entirety!

It was horrible to contemplate. Yet, in those tense, terrible moments Solemn could not keep himself from contemplating it. He wondered how, if at all, Dirty Shirt would get him out. The grewsome thought came to him that Dirty Shirt, to save labor, would probably just fill up the shaft with Solemn and Justice in it, and thus casually bury them both at one operation. It would be the easiest way.

But Solemn had never had any ambition to be buried with a horse; and he didn't want to begin on any new ambitions now. It consoled him some to know that if he was buried with a horse, the horse would be Justice. He felt that if he had to be buried with a horse he was as willing that it be Justice he was buried with as any horse that he knew.

But Solemn didn't want to be buried with a horse. In fact he didn't want to be buried at all—not for quite a while—individually or collectively; with or without a horse. Yet, as he heard Justice's bell drawing nearer, steadily nearer, Solemn was convinced that he was, whether he wanted to be or not, about to be buried and—*with a horse!*

Perspiration oozed from every pore of Solemn's body.

"My Gawd, she *is* gettin' nearer!" he groaned almost in panic, as the cowbell rang with such vigor that it was evident Justice could be no more than a few yards from the shaft.

Solemn cursed himself for sending Dirty Shirt to get the lug, at a time like this. How foolish it was, he thought, to send Dirty Shirt to get a lug so he could

climb out of the location shaft; then have a blind white pack horse fall into the shaft on top of him and develop a situation that would make it impossible for him ever to have a chance to use the lug to climb out on!

Never before had Solemn realized how unexpectedly things may happen. But Solemn was learning. The pity was, he was learning—as is often the case—too late.

"My Gawd, if the old horntoad-packin' fool would only hurry back—immediately!" he almost prayed.

Indeed, if a fervent, desperate desire to be out of a narrow hole, eight feet deep, into which a blind white pack horse with a bell on her neck is about to fall, be prayer, then Solemn prayed, frantically, and with all the passionate earnestness with which his soul was possessed! Solemn did, absolutely, want to be out of that hole.

It occurred to him that Dirty Shirt may have already returned, stopped at the camp, perhaps gone to sleep, and not noticed that Justice was loose. It was an inspiring thought. Solemn raised himself to his tiptoes, cupped his hands to his mouth, and shouted his partner's name.

No answer. A moment of silence. Then the sudden, intense clanging of the bell, as if Justice had violently shaken her head. Solemn heard it and trembled. It brought new terror to his rapidly tightening nerves.

"I gotta keep quiet," he muttered in alarm. "If Justice hears me, and Dirty Shirt don't, she's liable to try to come to the sound of my voice. And my Gawd," he added, with a gasp, "if she does come it'll be awful!"

The bell moved forward. Justice was coming. A moment later the bell was at the very edge of the shaft. Solemn could image poor, sightless, stumbling Justice pausing, her foot lifted, ready to take the fatal step that would cause her to plunge down into the hole upon him. The vision was agonizing. He cried out, sharply:

"Back up, Justice! Whoa—*Back up you old fool!*"

The cowbell clattered gently. A little stream of gravel and earth cascaded down the side of the shaft. It brought a terrifying thought to Solemn's mind. It might be Justice's hind feet that had dislodged the sand and gravel! If so, and she obeyed his advice to "back up" Justice would literally sit down on him from a height of eight feet—and all would be ended. Solemn hastened to reverse his command:

"No, no! Get up—I mean! Get up, Justice!" he yelled, frantically. "Get up! Shoo! You darned idiot!"

The bell clanged, as if Justice had moved back a step or two, and stopped. A moment of silence ensued. Then Solemn heard the bell slowly tolling. Justice seemed to be walking away. Again it stopped. A little later it started again. As near as he could judge, Justice was moving around the slope of the hill and Solemn heaved a sigh of relief. It was short-lived. The bell stopped; once more it jangled; and again it began to approach the shaft from the other side. Justice had, apparently, made a half-circle and was coming back.

Like the measured strokes of doom, the bell drew nearer.

The waiting, the uncertainty, was agony. Solemn felt his morale weaken. He flicked the sweat from his eyes; his hands trembled.

"My Gawd!" he half-moaned, "I do *wish* that darned Dirty Shirt would *re*-turn!" accenting the prefix pathetically.

The bell continued to approach, haltingly, yet surely. Relentlessly it advanced. It was now again almost at the edge of the shaft. Solemn peered upward; saw the oblong fragment of brassy, overheated sky, and nothing more. The bell paused—clanged—paused and clanged again.

"Hey! *Justice!* Whoa—wait a minute! Shoo!"

Solemn shouted nearly, if not entirely hysterically. "For Gawd's sake watch out what you are doin'!"

The bell stopped.

There was a long, soundless wait; Solemn crouched in the bottom of the shaft, looking fearfully upward. The bell suddenly jangled viciously; unexpectedly. Solemn answered with a startled, strangling, despairing:

*"Whoop—Ugh! Oh, Gawd!"*

## CHAPTER XVIII

### SAFE IN THE BLESSED SUNSHINE

Dirty Shirt Smith, lying on his stomach on the ground a few yards from the location hole in the bottom of which Solemn Johnson suffered, the cowbell tied on to the end of the lug extended before him, swallowed his quid of tobacco in the effort to suppress an explosion of raucous, unholy laughter when he heard Solemn's last frantic, terrified yell.

For half an hour the torture continued, Solemn unaware that Dirty Shirt was doing it.

Then the cowbell turned away from the shaft and went, leisurely, pausing—advancing—hesitating—moving onward, as a blind horse would go, until once more Solemn, listening breathlessly, near mental and physical exhaustion from the agony of doubt, heard it faintly, regularly, normally from a distance; as if Justice had returned again to Ground Hog Flat and was standing contentedly, half asleep, in the warm, restful sunshine.

A little later, Dirty Shirt, with the lug on his shoulder, strolled innocently up to the edge of the shaft and peered down at Solemn.

"Got that hole drilled?" he queried carelessly.

"Drop that danged pole down here and let me out!" Solemn demanded shortly.

Dirty Shirt slid the pole down.

"Must be kind of warm down there," he remarked. "You look like you been sweatin' a good deal!"

"Shut up, and hold that damned pole steady till I get out!"

When Solemn stood on the firm ground, under the welcome glare of the sun, his eyes gratefully swept the wide—beautiful—desert. He heaved a sigh of relief, looked toward Ground Hog Flat and saw Justice standing quietly, apparently safely tethered.

Solemn turned a searching look on Dirty Shirt. Dirty Shirt gazed back, without the flicker of an eyelash.

"Is that horse staked?" Solemn snapped.

"Why, I reckon," Dirty Shirt replied, as if surprised at the question. "She was staked when I went away this morning, and she seems to be staked now. Why was you inquirin'?" he finished almost too naïvely.

"Well, she was up here a while ago," Solemn replied, viciously, "and dog-gone near fell in on top of me!"

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt ejaculated. "Ain't that queer? So she was up here?"

"She was! And if she'd took another step she'd have come pilin' right down on to me. Once, she danged near slid in and was hangin' half over the edge before I could make her back up and go away!"

"Ain't that funny!"

"No, it ain't funny, nor never was funny!" Solemn broke in. "If you think it is or was—or could be—funny, just get down in a hole as little as that one is, and have a cussed old blind, white, pack horse with a bell on about to fall in on top of you yourself!"

Dirty Shirt found it expedient to look the other direction long enough to conceal a grin.

"I meant," he replied to Solemn's plaint, when able to control his facial muscles, "ain't it funny, Justice was staked when I departed for Horntoad Holler this morning, was staked when I returned and, as far as I can see, she is still staked at present; in spite of which you think

she was up here episodin' around, riskin' her liberty an' old white neck tryin' to fall in that shaft while you was flinchin', writhin' and squirmin' in agony down in the bottom of it!"

Solemn glared suspiciously at Dirty Shirt.

Dirty Shirt's own brown eyes were as guileless, bland and unoffending as the eyes of a small boy just after he has put a bent pin in his teacher's chair at school.

"Well, it's dog-gone——" Solemn began.

"I bet I know how it was!" Dirty Shirt interrupted. "I bet you was sort of warm and got drowsy, and went to sleep and just dreamed Justice was hoverin' over you! That's the p-sy-chology of it," he went on, infatuated with the inspirational quality of the alibi that had occurred to him. "You just had a kind of *'Oregon Boy'* nightmare in the daytime; a sort of echo of something you might have read sometime—maybe that Davenport book that Mother Skillern lent us to read when we was on our last trip out to Hellbroth Oasis!"

Solemn flushed as he remembered the possible source of Dirty Shirt's inspiration; and which Solemn himself had completely forgotten. His gray eyes narrowed wickedly.

"Some red-whiskered danged old fools has just naturally got too damned effective memories!" he snarled angrily, turning toward the camp. "And as far as I'm concerned, you and Justice and her darned bell, and the whole works—includin' that prospect hole—can go to hell! Personally, I'm goin' back to Red Bluff tomorrow morning; and *that's* the 'sickology' of that!"

"Justice was your idea——"

"Shut up, and don't mention ideas to me again!"

Dirty Shirt chuckled inwardly; he felt that out of seeming defeat he had achieved a notable victory.

For a few steps there was silence.

"Well," Dirty Shirt observed finally, "if we're driftin' back to Red Bluff in the morning, how about them samples of that ledge that crops out up in Hydrophobia Gulch, that looks like asbestos, we was goin' to get? We ain't got them yet."

"You can get them this afternoon," Solemn snapped. "You can pack your pick and shovel and things on Justice, and make the trip up there and back before supper time!"

"I'll take Versus——"

"You won't take Versus," Solemn broke in. "You'll take Justice; Versus' vacation is still in progress, at this writin'. Besides," Solemn went on, "I may want to take a nap while you're gone and I don't want that infernal bell janglin' and wakin' me up!"

Dirty Shirt agreed to take Justice.

After lunch, leading the blind white pack horse, a water canvas swung from the packsaddle, the cowbell clanging cheerfully, Dirty Shirt trudged away toward the long sloping spur of Dead Angel Mountain, behind which was Hydrophobia Gulch. As Dirty Shirt trudged, he snickered.

Occasionally, without stopping, he took a dried prune from his pocket, removed the seed and, reaching back, put the meat of the fruit between Justice's thick, sunburned lips.

Solemn watched Justice and Dirty Shirt until he could no longer hear the sound of the cowbell.

"I hope they both break their confounded old skinny necks!" he muttered, heaving a sigh of relief; glad to be alone with Versus—the calm, serene, inscrutable, unemotional one.

Somehow, Solemn felt that he never wanted to hear the ringing of Justice's bell again; he felt that he had had an overdose of cowbell, and he knew that he would never

forget how terrible a cowbell attached to the neck of a blind white pack horse, can sound under certain awful conditions.

"As quick as we get back to Red Bluff," Solemn told himself, "somebody's going to win a blind, dog-goned old white, pack gamble-horse if there's any way on creation's earth to make them do it! Providin'—" he added vindictively—"I don't shoot her and Dirty Shirt Smith both, first!"

After which, with Versus standing guard, Solemn stretched himself on a blanket, beneath one of the scrub Joshua trees, and went to sleep.

## CHAPTER XIX

### SOLEMN HAS A PRESENTIMENT

It was dusk when Solemn Johnson awoke.

He opened his eyes suddenly, as if he had been called; but by whom and from whence, he could not tell. Solemn's first consciousness was of exquisite, sublime, intoxicating silence. This was quickly followed by a strange, unaccountable feeling of dread. The very stillness became an ominous threat.

For a moment, Solemn lay quiet. The events of the day marshaled themselves in his mind. After a time, he sat up and looked around; expecting to see the familiar, angular figure of Dirty Shirt Smith, stooping over the camp-fire, warming up the beans for supper, or perchance sitting beside the friendly blaze. But there was no fire; nor was there any Dirty Shirt Smith. And where Justice should have stood, like a dingy white splotch on Ground Hog Flat, there was only the unbroken grayness of the deepening twilight. Even Versus, standing pensively beside the place where the supper fire ought to have been, was motionless, inert as a statue of blue-brown marble, and made no sound.

Solemn arose thoughtfully, kindled a fire, and mechanically began to prepare the evening meal. Versus came near and watched, silently, each of Solemn's actions. It seemed as if she, too, was depressed—filled with queer, unspeakable gloom.

"It's danged funny," Solemn mumbled to himself, "what makes me feel like this!"

He listened at intervals for the sound of Justice's bell; the desert gave back no near or distant jangle.

Methodically, Solemn went to the ground cache where he and Dirty Shirt kept their grub, scraped the sand from the box, lifted the lid, took out a bacon rind and gave it to Versus. She accepted it. But even so, she did it with a certain somber restraint. Solemn smiled wistfully as Versus chewed the morsel.

"She knows which side of her bacon rind the grease is on!" he muttered whimsically.

One by one, as by a magic hand, the stars were lighted, until the heavens were aglow with myriad twinkling candle flames.

That weird, translucent sheen which a starlit, moonless sky sheds upon the desert—and only upon the desert—and which is neither darkness nor light, nor dusk nor dawn, nor of any earthly quality, settled down on Dead Angel Mountain, Ground Hog Flat and the more distant Hellfire Basin. It enveloped all, like an eternal verity that should forever reveal and yet conceal; forever invite and yet repulse, forever intrigue and still resist the eyes of man.

Solemn knew that night had come.

He felt suddenly old, and worn, and alone. It came to him, as a shock, that he and Dirty Shirt were both well along in years—already nearing the allotted three score and ten—and age must be, and was surely, creeping upon them. Yet, until that moment, Solemn had never noticed it.

An avalanche of memories flooded Solemn's mind.

Like flaming meteors, flashing across a midnight sky, there swept before his mental vision a review of the nearly forty years during which he and Dirty Shirt had

wandered together from place to place, drawn by the empire-building lure that fills forever the prospector's gold-embellished dream.

Solemn recalled, in quick succession, the hardships, the hopes and disappointments, the failures and successes, the diversions, the quarrels. The latter, often profane; seemingly vicious; but understood, always, deep in the hearts of both, to be for entertainment alone. He visualized the heat, the thirst, the hunger, the poverty and, since they found the borax mine, the riches that he and Dirty Shirt had shared and shared alike.

Solemn smiled as he thought of the borax mine.

It seemed he could see, again, Versus standing beside the dwarf Joshua tree, in the red dawn, chewing on Dirty Shirt's sock; Dirty Shirt's chagrin as he sat up on his blankets and saw what Versus was doing; the look of amazement on Dirty Shirt's face, as he glanced at the small boulder he hurriedly picked up to hurl at Versus' head, and discovered that it was a chunk of pure borax from the great ledge which, a little later, Solemn and Dirty Shirt located and exposed to the needs and uses of humankind.

A thrill of pride cheered Solemn when he remembered the borax mine. It was the one great triumph of his and Dirty Shirt's lives. It justified all of the other weary years that had gone before. Because of it, the two-hundred-and-seven population, one Chinese laundry, seven-saloon, et cetera, metropolis of Red Bluff had sprung up, prosperity had come to many, the wheels of industry were made to revolve in the midst of the vast imperishable desert and civilization's need for borax was being supplied.

In his soul Solemn Johnson was altruistic.

He rejoiced more, as did Dirty Shirt, in the happiness it made possible for others than in the immense wealth

which the borax mine had brought to himself and Dirty Shirt. Solemn gave put a passing thought to the half-million, or more, dollars which he and Dirty Shirt had received in royalties from the thousands of tons of borax the mine had produced and was still producing, and practically all of which money reposed to his and Dirty Shirt's credit in Los Angeles banks.

The mania of big spending, when big money came to them, had not lured Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith to the places of show and shame where men imagine that, by flinging a golden shower of coins, they can cause the illusive flowers of happiness to spring up and bloom unfadingly along their hectic path. These simple, yet wise; old, yet young, prospectors who together had drunk deeply at the fountain of the Infinite, had measured the *absolute* of the elemental with the *perhaps* of the artificial, and they knew that the high-priced pleasures of the latter were but effervescent bubbles. And as they lived before wealth, Solemn and Dirty Shirt had lived after wealth; proud, yet humble worshipers at the shrine of the great truths and realities of creation.

Solemn was not morbid, even now; though his heart was heavy.

As he thought of Dirty Shirt and blind, white Justice somewhere—and God only knew where—out in the impenetrable silence and darkness of the night, when they should have been back to camp hours before, a sigh of utter loneliness escaped from his lips.

*"I do wisht to Gawd they'd get back,"* he muttered.

The sound of his own voice startled Solemn from his pensive reverie. Squatting down by the fire, he slowly dished out a plate of beans:

"Reckon I'd just as well eat!" he mumbled.

But Solemn's interest was not in food; the sight of it sickened him; he held the plate on his knees for a mo-

ment, then set it aside for Versus. She sniffed at the beans; nosed a couple indifferently off on to the ground, turned away and stood moodily, with drooping head and long ears hanging despondently forward.

Versus' refusal to eat added to Solemn's mental distress.

"Something sure as hell must be fatal," he exclaimed, "when Versus declines to eat her beans!"

For a little longer Solemn bore the suspense; listening, hoping to hear the jangle of Justice's bell. No sound came out of the night.

Convinced at last, that some accident had befallen Dirty Shirt or Justice, or both, Solemn arose with sudden determination, got the camp lantern, lighted it and started resolutely out into the darkness in the direction Dirty Shirt and Justice had gone, toward the long sloping spur of Dead Angel Mountain, behind which were the weird, forbidding depths of Hydrophobia Gulch.

Versus followed.

Solemn picked his way carefully, avoiding cactus, badger holes, ant hills, and other obstructions of the desert. Occasionally he paused to listen, or strain his eyes toward Hydrophobia Gulch, hoping he would hear the clatter of Justice's bell, or perchance see her white, ghost-like form silhouetted on the distant, star-studded horizon.

But he saw nothing; heard nothing.

And as Solemn and Versus proceeded, the feeling of impending disaster which he had experienced when he first awakened and found that Justice and Dirty Shirt were missing, grew more profound; weighed heavier and still heavier on Solemn's mind.

He thought of a thousand things that might have happened to Dirty Shirt, any one of which would result in his death or injury. Age itself may have caused him to sink exhausted, somewhere along the way. Solemn could

imagine Dirty Shirt, so stricken, lying gasping out his life—alone—with none save blind white Justice beside him, to render aid.

He might have been bitten by a rattlesnake, a Gila monster, a scorpion, a vinegerone, a hydrophobia cat, a centipede, or some other of the multitudinous venomous reptiles, insects or animals that inhabited the region in which they were sojourning. Solemn pictured Dirty Shirt, writhing in convulsions, his body swollen, tongue protruding, his brown friendly eyes set and glassy, tortured with agony, as the insidious venom seeped through his veins, beside some black ledge of rock, giant cat-claw, or cholo cactus.

He might have fallen from a cliff.

And Solemn, in his over-anxious mental state, could see Dirty Shirt dead, dying, mangled, unable to move or cry out for help—though such a cry, could he utter it, would be worse than futile in the unpeopled desolation and solitude and isolation overspreading Dead Angel Mountain and the unmeasured desert around it.

Filled with such unhappy conjectures; with each step sinking deeper and deeper into hopelessness, Solemn Johnson hurried onward; Versus faithfully following, shuffled along at his heels.

## CHAPTER XX

### DIRTY SHIRT FOUND

A QUARTER of a mile from camp, Versus stopped suddenly, held up her head, her long sensitive ears thrust forward in a listening attitude. She stood so for a moment, tense, then suddenly relaxed, disappointedly. A little later she put her nose to the ground, shuffling feverishly back and forth across their path and sniffing nervously. Solemn watched the burro, surprised at her actions.

Exactly as a dog, of hunting breed, searches for the scent of its quarry, Versus behaved. Soon, with her muzzle close to the ground, sniffing as she went, she started eagerly forward.

"Danged if I don't believe that fool burro is trailing Justice and Dirty Shirt!" Solemn exclaimed in amazement. "She either hears 'em, sees 'em, or smells 'em, or I'm a liar!"

After that, Versus led and Solemn followed.

For an hour they toiled onward.

Near the head of Hydrophobia Gulch, a short distance from where the gorge ended abruptly in a sheer rock wall that fell away, like the cliff of an abandoned waterfall, from a little volcanic sink or basin in the mountainside, and perhaps a half-mile below the summit of Dead Angel Mountain, Versus again came to a halt. She once more lifted up her head, brayed loudly and

long, her eyes meanwhile looking forward into the darkness.

There followed a moment of silence.

Solemn's heart gave a leap of joy. He heard the faint jangling of Justice's bell. With Versus he hurried toward the sound, and discovered Justice standing, motionless, in the basin at the head of Hydrophobia Gulch. Apparently, the blind white pack horse had been standing for hours in the same place.

As Solemn and Versus came near, Justice gave a low pathetic whinny. A half-dozen steps below her, was the brink of the precipice, forty or fifty feet high, which was the upper end of the gorge.

Solemn's first thought, when he noticed Justice's nearness to the precipice, was that Dirty Shirt had fallen over the cliff. He stood in the small circle of yellow light given out by the lantern and looked anxiously around, listening.

*"For Gawd's sake."*

Solemn jumped. It was Dirty Shirt's voice.

"For Gawd's sake give me a chew of tobacco and a drink of water," the voice continued, "and watch out for that damned rattlesnake!"

Even yet, Solemn had not been able to see Dirty Shirt.

A few yards to Solemn's left, as he faced down the canyon, a rough sharp basalt dyke or ridge, the exposed surface ten or fifteen feet in length, projected upward a few feet above the steep slope of the canyon-wall. Back of the dyke was a low cliff of some chalklike formation; between the foot of the cliff and the basalt ledge was a narrow, natural path, a yard wide, the volcanic outcropping forming a sort of retaining wall on the canyon side of the path.

"Where—where—be you?" Solemn called tremulously.

"Here—here I be!" Dirty Shirt shouted back, his

voice queerly blending plaintiveness and petty impatience, and coming from behind the low basalt ridge. "Give me that chew of tobacco—and—drink of water! And watch out for that cussed rattlesnake, or you'll step on him; he's darn near drove me crazy all evening. I could hear him and smell him, but I couldn't see him, and I was afraid he'd stampede Justice and make her break her darn fool old skinny neck. Give her a drink of water, too! The bag is hangin' on the packsaddle. But watch out for that danged snake!"

A twinge of remorse stung Solemn; when Dirty Shirt said he feared the rattlesnake would stampede Justice, and make her break her "darn fool old skinny neck!" the words were to Solemn a reproachful echo, almost verbatim, of his own lightly spoken, but wicked hope, expressed a few hours before, as he watched Dirty Shirt and Justice leave the camp.

In the narrow path between the basalt dyke and the low crumbling cliff, Solemn found Dirty Shirt. He was lying on his left side, his legs and the lower part of his body buried under a mass of shale matter which had come down in a small avalanche from the little bluff and covered him.

Solemn handed Dirty Shirt his plug of tobacco.

"Mine's in my under-pants pocket, and I can't get to it," Dirty Shirt said, biting off a chunk of the plug. "Gosh, I've been blamed near insane for a chew. Gawd, that tastes good!"

Solemn turned away for the water.

"Give Justice a drink, first!" Dirty Shirt called.

Solemn poured out a hatful of water for Justice, returned to Dirty Shirt, gave him a drink, then hung the canvas water-bag on a sharp projection on the outer wall of the small basalt dyke.

"Did you see anything of that rattlesnake?" Dirty

Shirt asked, after swallowing copious drafts of water.

"No, but I smelled him," Solemn answered, "I can smell him yet!"

"So can I smell him—and I've smelled him till I'm sick of smellin' him," Dirty Shirt complained fretfully. "I wisht you could kill him."

"He's probably gone in the rocks for the night," Solemn interrupted. "How'd this thing happen, anyhow?"

"Well, I noticed that basalt and shale 'contact,'" Dirty Shirt explained, "and thought I'd pick around on it a little and maybe find something. And the dog-gone stuff slid! How'd you find me and Justice away up here?"

"Versus—she trailed you."

"Trailed us? Smelled us?" Dirty Shirt asked incredulously.

"Just like a hound trailin' a rabbit!" Solemn replied. "I'll get you out in a little while.—Where's the shovel?"

"'Twas layin' by Justice—I don't think she's moved all evening! I was using the pick and it's covered up under me! *Gawd, this tobacco's good!* I was so infernal hungry for it I thought I'd die. I'm a notion to swaller some of it!"

"Think you're hurt much?" Solemn asked, returning with the shovel.

"No," Dirty Shirt answered. "Just my legs and hips and stomach squashed a little. They're kind of numb, but I don't think anything is busted."

To remove the shale which was holding Dirty Shirt down, Solemn was forced to climb over his partner's body and, owing to the outward bulge of the cliff, crouch in the narrow, trenchlike path, at Dirty Shirt's feet. As Solemn began shoveling the débris, cautiously, over the low basalt dyke into the canyon, Dirty Shirt called warningly:

"You've got to be darned careful and don't bump

against that rotten chalk-cliff behind you, or some more of it'll come down!"

By the light of the lantern, which Solemn had set on top of the basalt dyke, he could see that the face of the cliff was eroded and worn until it was little more than a mass of tremulous pillars, shaped by the action of the air and winds into queer grotesque forms, which stood perpendicularly on perilously insecure foundations.

Solemn realized that it was a precarious situation, especially at the place where he was compelled to work. But he had not mentioned it, and now, to reassure Dirty Shirt, he affected a disbelief of danger.

"There ain't much chance," Solemn began, replying to Dirty Shirt's warning.

"There's a darned good chance of it crumblin' again!" Dirty Shirt broke in. "And if it does come down, it's liable to catch you, too, and also bury me total and make an abject funeral out of the whole works of us!"

" 'Tain't likely," Solemn declared lightly, but continuing to shovel carefully. "It's just about impossible for the same thing to happen the same way in the same place twice in the same day!"

"It's the impossible things that happen, sometimes," Dirty Shirt argued; "in fact, darn near practically all the time! So, for Gawd's sake watch out—and go dog-gone easy!"

For a while, Solemn worked on, silently.

"Does it feel like I'm gettin' any of it off—" he began.

The end of the shovel handle scraped against the cliff and gouged into the barely balanced pillars behind him. The instant he felt the contact, Solemn, still crouched, whirled in a desperate effort to throw himself out of the narrow trench, at its lower end, and escape the downward rush of the mass he had inadvertently dislodged.

## CHAPTER XXI

### CAUGHT IN THE SLIDE

WHILE Solemn Johnson was still crouched forward, the slide came down on him. The shovel flew from his hands, knocked the lantern from the top of the basalt dyke, and both went clattering among the rocks in the darkness of the gorge. Solemn was crushed, face downward, beneath the weight of shale and earth he had loosened from the face of the cliff. His effort saved him from being entirely covered; like Dirty Shirt, only Solemn's legs and the lower portion of his body were buried.

A groan came from Dirty Shirt's lips.

"My Gawd!" he exclaimed, from the cloud of dust and the darkness that now enveloped them. "The impossible thing—did—happen! Did it catch you, Solemn?" he called.

"I—I—reckon it—did," Solemn answered, his voice sounding muffled and labored. "I—don't know how much—is—on me; but it's got my legs—and—back pinned down till—I can't move them—or turn over. Did any more—come—on you?"

Much more had come down on Dirty Shirt; but he lied.

"Not much, I reckon," he replied, "maybe a little more! It don't seem any heavier—especially—but I can't wiggle my feet very good, now."

For a while neither Solemn nor Dirty Shirt spoke.

The situation was so absurd, yet so tragic, that Solemn and Dirty Shirt were at first stunned by it. That they should both be caught in such a trap, in such an exactly similar manner, seemed unbelievable to them. It was a ghastly impossible nightmare.

Like animals that have nearly, but not quite, escaped the heavy log of a dead-fall and are held fast, alive, conscious of their terrible plight, yet powerless to free themselves, and must wait, watch, and be aware of the terrible death creeping upon them, so were Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith caught by the treacherous shale that held them in its fearful clutch.

Nor could they hope for human aid.

The very isolation of Dead Angel Mountain had been its chief lure to Solemn and Dirty Shirt. Surrounded by an almost impassable barrier of desert, the mighty mountain stood alone in splendid, stately solitude. Rarely, if ever, did men pass that way. Even the few Mojave or Digger Indians that as yet roamed these waterless wastes shunned, as an evil thing, Dead Angel Mountain. The legend that the good Manitou once banished a recalcitrant angel to its barren, treeless summit gave to Dead Angel Mountain its name.

Unable to endure the fearful loneliness, the dreadful silence, the wayward child of heaven died of heartbreak in the place of its cruel exile. Living savages, peopling their imaginations with the creatures of superstition, turned aside when their paths led toward this somber, yet magnificent monument of despair and desolation.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt knew, as they lay in the darkness, that their situation was hopeless. A prayer for human assistance would be as vain as a spoken command to the basalt dyke to sink again into the earth, and let the mass of shale that was heaped upon them flow down into the black abyss of Hydrophobia Gulch, and free

them by the same law—the law of gravitation—which now imprisoned and held them fast. To cry out, each knew, would be a waste of breath.

The thought came to Solemn that some super-Satan, æons ago, had pushed up from hell, the hard volcanic ridge of basalt; set beside it the soft half-rock formation of the low small bluff that had crumbled on them; and through the centuries little demons in the form of whirling winds, tiny flaming imps leaping from the flashing sunlight, had whittled at the face of the cliff of chalk, shaping, carving, chiseling the whole into a death-trap for the destined—and single—purpose of catching, trapping, as it had caught and trapped at last, Dirty Shirt Smith and himself.

The odd whimsy, weird fantasy, caused Solemn to laugh aloud at its sheer absurdity, and mutter:

"Gosh, I—I—must be—wanderin'."

"What'd you say?" Dirty Shirt called, from his end of the living grave.

"I—just—said—" Solemn replied "I—must be wanderin'."

"I wisht to Gawd I could wander!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed with pathetic, unconscious humor. He paused a moment, then added: "I sure—wish we—could 'wander' —both of us; and—especially before that cussed rattlesnake gets to—to—'wanderin' '—around any more like he was this evenin'! Do you reckon he'll come out—again —in the night?"

"There's no—tellin'—rattlesnakes—travel 'round—most anytime"—Solemn answered—"day—or—night but—he probably—won't—I—I—wouldn't worry——"

"Gawd, it's enough"—Dirty Shirt broke in—"to make anybody worry to have a rattlesnake—smellin' like he's as close to their heads—as that cussed snake smelled like he was close to mine this evening before you and Versus

come! But—if—he comes—I reckon he'll just have to come!" he finished, with a rather hopeless philosophy.

Again, Solemn and Dirty Shirt lapsed into silence.

Save for the numbness and sense of weight on their bodies, they suffered little, except from thirst, and not any acute pain.

At rare intervals there was a faint jangle of Justice's bell. Versus made no noise whatever. She had bedded down near the blind white pack horse, and was as silent as if asleep.

Neither Solemn nor Dirty Shirt complained. With stoical fortitude they awaited what each knew would be a slow, torturing, terrible death; there would come—marching in fiendish procession, the desert's heartless, devilish trinity: Heat—Thirst—finally raving madness.

When the sun flamed above the desolate rim of the earth, and poured down on their unsheltered heads its wrath would sear their brains into stark and horrible madness ere it put the seal of eternal silence on their parched and delirious lips, or blotted out forever, from their blinded, bursting eyes its own silent pitiless glare.

"Wonder—what—time it—is?" Solemn finally asked. "The night—must—be gettin'—along. My watch—is—under me—and—I can't get—it."

"Mine's on top of me," Dirty Shirt replied, "but I can't get to my matches, and it's too—dark—to tell without a light! Must be gettin' toward morning, though. *Gawd, I'm glad I got this tobacco!* I don't believe I could endure without it to chew!"

Dirty Shirt suddenly remembered that he had kept all of Solemn's plug, and Solemn, perhaps, had no other.

"Was that all the tobacco you had, Solemn?" he called. "Have you got any more for yourself?"

Solemn had none, but had not mentioned the fact.

"I—I—can get—along," he replied evasively.

"I didn't think about that bein' all you had," Dirty Shirt broke in self-reproachfully. "If it wasn't so dark, maybe I could pitch a piece over to you. But I'm afraid we'd lose it!"

"Never—mind—I—can get—along!" Solemn repeated.

## CHAPTER XXII

### VERSUS VS. RATTLESNAKE

DAY came, with the deceptive freshness of a desert dawn.

The stars dissolved in a gray film that suddenly covered the sky, from horizon to horizon. A seductive, almost damp coolness filled the air. A splash of coral pink came on the eastern rim of the desert; it grew, and as it grew, streams of itself flowed north and south until that whole edge of the earth was fringed with a border of the same exquisite hue.

The grayness of the sky settled down on the slopes of the mountains; the ocean of sand-drifts took on a mist-like softness; the deep canyons were lakes of midnight-purple.

Over all, there was silence.

The fringe of coral pink swelled upward, into an arch; from its center there shot skyward shafts of searchlight whiteness, spaced between other shafts shadow–and–smokelike in their texture. A pastel fan opened across the gray of the upper realm filling half of the heavens; a sheen of old-rose touched the summit of Dead Angel Mountain; like spilled perfume diffused itself downward over the barren slopes.

The sand-dunes lightened to the shade of new-bleached straw; the raven-purple of the canyons became a thin, grape-kissed, cerulean blue.

The taste of the air then, to the lungs of breathing things, was like water from lime-rock springs to lips that are parched with thirst.

The coral pink arch grew—and spread; became a flood of ruby wine, blotted out all the delicate pink; the gentle gray of the sky changed to a metallic hardness; the shafts of light receded, and as they receded they were shaped into lances of pearl and amethyst, garnet, beryl and yellow amber; the great pasteled fan was transmuted into a glorified, translucent shell, its edges gilded with brightest beaten gold, its heart studded with gleaming opals, and it rose up—and up—out of a sea of ruby wine.

*And there was silence—*

All creation was hushed before the awful beauty and drama and majesty of soundless, celestial color.

A yellow flame fell on the top of Dead Angel Mountain and poured downward; the old-rose fled before it, staining with its own loveliness the grape-kissed blue of the canyons; the cruel, metallic haze of the sky grew harsher, harder, imposed itself upon the ocean of sand. The sea of ruby wine became the scarlet red of anger, passion, hate. In the neck of the translucent shell there blazed a spot of dazzling, indescribable brightness. Instantly, the spot pushed upward, and revealed itself as the rounded edge of a tremendous ball that was being spewed up out of the anger and passion of the hatered sea.

The ball grew larger—still larger—and larger yet. And its color was the color of blood and fire. From it there flashed arrows of flame that sped with incredible swiftness over the yellowing ocean of sand. And the arrows of flame pierced with livid fear the souls of every living thing in their path.

The sphere pushed upward and grew—and pushed upward—and a mighty circle of blood and fire leaped, in

all its completeness, above the eastern rim of the desert. The freshness went out of the air.

It was dry—dry—like sifted ashes.

The taste of the air, then, to the lungs of breathing things, was the taste of the bitter waters of the Great Dead Sea to the lips of one who dies of thirst.

. . . So came the day.

And Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith, imprisoned by the treacherous shale in the death-trap, at the head of Hydrophobia Gulch, on Dead Angel Mountain, miles from any human habitation, or help, knew the cruel torture that the day would bring to them.

With light, Solemn and Dirty Shirt appraised their hopeless situation.

The main portion of the slide was on their feet and legs; extending over their bodies to a little above their waists. The weight of the mass was terrific, yet the narrowness of the space between the basalt dyke and the low cliff from which the avalanche had come, prevented the full force of the pressure from bearing down upon them. Otherwise, Solemn and Dirty Shirt would have succumbed long before morning.

There was little danger of additional slides. The entire front of the cliff had already fallen; at least the porous, decomposed portion of it, and the remainder was reasonably firm.

Dirty Shirt's position was such that by turning his head, and craning his neck, he could peer around the upper end of the small basalt dyke and look down to where Justice and Versus were standing.

The blind white pack horse stood in the same place where Dirty Shirt left her the afternoon before, and where Solemn and Versus first had found her. Apparently, Justice had not moved during the entire night. Versus had got up and was standing near by.

Throughout the night, Justice's bell was silent, except at long intervals and then it had sounded only gently. With the coming of day, she began frequently and impatiently to shake her head, causing the bell to jangle loudly and with violence in its vibrations.

Even when full daylight had come, the mound of piled up shale between Solemn and Dirty Shirt prevented them from seeing each other.

Dirty Shirt was first to break the silence.

"Solemn," he called, "are you asleep?"

For a moment there was no answer. Dirty Shirt feared that his partner was already unconscious or dead. While the fear was yet in his mind, there came the half hope that it was true; that Solemn had passed beyond the veil of consciousness and would escape the agony which Dirty Shirt knew that the coming hours, of heat and thirst, must bring.

"My—legs—and about—half—my body is," Solemn called back. "They're numb. But the—rest of me—is —awake."

Solemn's voice showed that he suffered greatly.

"It's light now," Dirty Shirt shouted, "maybe I can pitch a chunk of this tobacco over to you, and——"

"Never—mind," Solemn interrupted. "You'd better—not—try it. The chances—are—it'd hit—where I couldn't reach—it—and be—lost! Just—keep—it for—yourself!"

"I'm going to pitch it!" Dirty Shirt cried. "But—wait a minute! Maybe I can fix it so I can throw it straighter!"

With his free hand, Dirty Shirt managed to get a soiled bandanna handkerchief from his pocket; he held the plug of tobacco between his teeth and twisted it apart; placed the larger half in the handkerchief, put a small stone with it, and with his teeth and hand tied the hand-

kerchief into a bag so the tobacco and stone would not fall out.

"Here she comes!" he yelled to Solemn. "Watch out, I'm goin' to throw it! I tied a rock up with it so I could pitch it better. So, be careful, or it'll hit your head!"

Carefully estimating the distance, Dirty Shirt tossed the awkward missile over the pile of shale. It struck the cliff and rolled down into the trench a couple of feet beyond Solemn's head.

"Did you get it?" Dirty Shirt yelled.

"Not—yet—but I think—I can."

By stretching his hand forward as far as he could, Solemn managed to clutch the edge of the handkerchief.

"Now—I—got it!" he called to Dirty Shirt, taking, more eagerly than Dirty Shirt knew, a chew of the tobacco.

"Pitchin'—that—tobacco was—kind of—thoughtful of you—Dirty Shirt!' he added, after a moment. "I'm —much—obliged!"

" 'Twasn't nothin'," Dirty Shirt replied; "only just fair. We've been—splittin' for nearly forty years on grub and water and work—and royalties from the borax mine; and it's too late now, not to split on tobacco."

When Dirty Shirt spoke of the borax mine, and the royalties Solemn and he had received from it, there came to the minds of both thoughts of the large sum of money on deposit to their credit in Los Angeles banks. It seemed ironical that with hundreds of thousands of dollars at their command, they should now be dying, unable to purchase even one small drop of water to cool their lips; that they would never be able to use that golden store of wealth which to some would have meant so much.

Answering their mutual thought, Solemn called to Dirty Shirt:

"The—borax mine—has—been quite—a—success,

ain't it? We—got—five hundred—thousand—dollars down there—in—Los Angeles—or—maybe more," Solemn paused.

"Yes, and I'd give the whole damned works," Dirty Shirt replied, with a bitter laugh, "to get out from under this pile of cussed shale, just once! I"—his voice took on a sound of sudden alarm—"I can smell that infernal rattlesnake again. Can you smell him?" he cried.

"No," Solemn answered, "I can't—smell him. He must—be—on—your end of the—slide."

Dirty Shirt craned his neck and looked around.

"My gosh A'mighty!" he shouted. "He is on this end. He's comin' out of a little crack in the bluff!"

"You'd better—hold—still—and—keep quiet—so—he—won't notice—you," Solemn called.

"If I could get a rock big enough—and could throw it," Dirty Shirt shouted back, "I'd do the noticin'—and he'd be *what* I'd make keep quiet!"

But Dirty Shirt heeded Solemn's advice. Motionless and silently, his eyes filled with loathing, not unmixed with fear, he watched the snake as, with hideous, wedge-shaped head elevated a little, it crept slowly, horrible in its sinuous gracefulness, down out of the cliff. It crawled cautiously to one side of and around a spiny bed of prickly pear cactus, and stopped a dozen feet from Dirty Shirt's head, while its rattles kept up a gentle whirring, its beady eyes alert, its slender, lance-like tongue playing in and out of its poisonous mouth.

Dirty Shirt cringed, wondering which way it would go.

Versus, as the reptile appeared, held up her head, sniffing the air suspiciously. She, too, evidently detected the sickening, musky odor of the snake.

Justice, her nostrils dilated, her body trembling, stood in rigid, terrified dread. Her sense of smell and hearing, super-acute, had told her of the presence of the ven-

omous scourge of the desert, which her sightless, pathetic eyes could not see.

The rattlesnake moved onward; carefully advancing, pausing and advancing, down the slope into the little basin toward where Justice and Versus were standing. Dirty Shirt gazed at the thing; horror and revulsion in his eyes.

Versus' eyes suddenly discovered the thick, diamond-mottled threat moving with sinister lazy assurance toward her. The little burro stood motionless, scarcely breathing, as the rattlesnake slowly drew near; her eyes were fixed on the flexible, muscular folds as the reptile advanced, its malign eyes glistening, its undulating five-foot length contracting, expanding, reaching—stretching—pushing forward with fascinating, relentless, persistence. A yard from Versus and between Justice and her, the rattlesnake stopped—for only an instant.

In that instant the little mouse-colored burro leaped; and quicker than the upward, lightninglike stab of the deadly fangs, her four small, iron-hard hoofs, bunched closely together—like a fist—came down, a literal sledge of death, on the rattlesnake's head. Again and again Versus sprang on the snake, while the writhing coils lashed about in the frenzy of mortal injury and the rattles whirred in incessant, impotent fury.

Poor blind Justice—accustomed to trust only to the guidance of a human hand, or the directing pull of her stake rope, stood snorting in terror; the flesh of her shoulders shaking; her flanks heaving and twitching, her whole body wet with the perspiration of fear, and dared not move, as Versus tramped the snake to death.

The whirr of the rattles grew less; the contortions, the writhings more feeble; there was a convulsive tremor and the rattlesnake lay mangled and dead.

"Well, I'll be—*damned!*" Dirty Shirt shouted to Sol-

emn, forgetting for the moment their own unhappy dilemma in his admiration of Versus' heroic act. "I wisht to Gawd you could have seen Versus kill that cussed snake!"

"Did—she—kill—it?"

"She squashed it!" Dirty Shirt called back exultingly.

"I've—seen her—squash 'em," Solemn answered, his voice sounding broken and tired. "I—saw her—squash —that one—you remember?—that was about—to bite—your leg at that—other—water—seep—over—on the other—side of—Dead Angel—Mountain—that time!"

When the rattlesnake lay still, Versus sniffed at the crushed, motionless body, turned around, backed up to her conquered enemy, and seemingly dozed; occasionally, as if remembering something, she lashed out contemptuously, viciously, with one or the other of her hind feet at the now dead, and forever harmless, reptile.

Justice's fear finally subsided, and the blind white pack horse stood quietly again, in her pathetic attitude of patient waiting. At regular intervals she threw up her head, shook it violently, causing her bell to jangle loudly.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### LOWER AND LOWER

THE sun climbed higher. The air grew hotter, dryer. All night both Solemn and Dirty Shirt had suffered terrible thirst. The canvas water-bag hung on the outer side of the basalt dyke, but a few feet from them—yet, beyond the reach of either.

With the torrid blaze of the morning sun their craving for water became a torture. It seemed to them that their bodies were being slowly turned into mere ash-dry, moistureless hulks. But even so, neither during the night, nor since the coming of the day had Solemn or Dirty Shirt mentioned the thirst that was consuming them. With Apache or Yaqui stolidity, each endured his agony; knowing that the suffering of the other was fully equal to his own.

Talk, because of the dryness of their throats, the thirst-slime that filled their mouths, and their already swollen tongues and lips, was becoming more and more an agonizing, well-nigh impossible effort.

Although Dirty Shirt had been under the slide longer than Solemn, yet, perhaps because of Solemn's greater age, the more painful position in which he was held, Solemn seemed to be weakening the faster. When Solemn last spoke, Dirty Shirt knew from his voice that it would not be long until when he called to Solemn he would listen in vain for his answer.

Only the regular, persistent, jangle of Justice's bell, when she tossed her head, or shook it, broke the parched stillness of the air. At times Solemn and Dirty Shirt seemed to hear the bell from a great distance, as if they dozed or were half asleep; at other times it clattered and clamored with startling clearness and volume.

"I wisht—to—Gawd—I—had—a—gun!" Dirty Shirt cried brokenly, thickly, immediately after an especially violent, almost signal-like clanging of Justice's bell.

Solemn, though nearly unconscious, heard Dirty Shirt's words. The natural thought flashed to his mind. Their condition was hopeless; hours of agony, thirst, torture, delirium awaited them. A pistol shot——

"No!—No!" Solemn groaned protestingly, struggling to articulate. "No!—You—wouldn't—couldn't—do—*that*—Dirty Shirt!"

Dirty Shirt understood what Solemn meant.

"I—wasn't—thinkin'—of—that—for—for—us!" he replied, his own voice coming in harsh, rasping gasps. "I—*we*—can—stick—it out. I—was thinkin'—of—of Justice—stumblin'—blind—huntin'—huntin'—for—water and not—not—findin' it. Versus—will—probably—go—make—it—back—to—Red—Bluff."

There was a pause.

"It—will—be—hell—for—Justice," Solemn answered, each word a struggle. "It—must—be—awful—to be—always—in—the dark." The sentence ended in a moan.

Dirty Shirt turned his head and peered upward into the sky, now a great, inverted, polished bowl of brass, extending over and covering the whole earth, and radiating downward shafts of heat of terrific intensity. High above him, he saw a black speck floating in silent, ominous circles. Dirty Shirt shut his eyes.

"Damn—that—that buzzard!" he gasped. "Why—couldn't—it—have waited!"

He remembered, and was glad that Solemn—caught face downward as he said he was—if still conscious, was lying in such a position that he could not see the gruesome, floating prophecy of death. Unable to resist the impulse, Dirty Shirt looked again into the sky.

Another black speck had joined the first. They were lower. Though still thousands of feet above him.

Dirty Shirt knew that these feathered ghouls of the air would not touch earth while there was life in the body of the creature they silently watched, patient in their awful desire. The thought gave him a measure of comfort.

The buzzards came lower—still lower.

Their approach filled Dirty Shirt with sudden, startling alarm.

"Solemn!" he called, "Solemn—are—you—still——"

Solemn's voice came faintly back.

"I'm—all—right. Only—kind—of—tired."

A frenzy of fierce rebellion surged through Dirty Shirt's soul. He tore with his free hand at the mass of shale crushing him down; his fingers bled; with eyes closed, face contorted with fury and rage, blindly, frantically, he clawed at the cinder-hot pile of débris that was holding him fast.

Suddenly, the wild absurdity of his efforts struck him as something intolerably funny, comical. He laughed, a ghastly, guttural, insane explosion of mirth. The spasm passed. He relaxed, and Dirty Shirt lay as if dead.

Again Dirty Shirt opened his eyes; looked up into the furnace hot sky. The black specks were wheeling—wheeling—with the same hellish patience and sureness.

"Damn—them—buzzards!" he snarled, chokingly. "They—make—me—*nervous!*"

And Dirty Shirt did not realize the heart-breaking humor of the almost childish complaint.

The seconds were hours; the minutes, ages. "Sol—Solemn!"

There was no answer. Only a low, unintelligible moan; the effort of a tongue swollen and dry beyond the power to function.

Again and again, blind white Justice raised her head and shook it—shook it; over and over the metallic clanging of the bell rang out—stopped—waited—rang out, again and again.

Versus came and stood near Dirty Shirt's head; looked down upon him curiously, a puzzled wonderment in her faithful brown eyes. Her rough muzzle—dry, hot, harsh—touched Dirty Shirt's forehead. He reached upward, caught the coarse shaggy wool on Versus' jaw in his hand; gripped it; held fast; clung to it, as if in some way, the loyal, humble, mouse-colored burro would hold him back—*could* hold him back—from the ocean of blackness into which he was slipping.

Motionless, Versus stood quiet; made no effort to pull herself free.

After a while Dirty Shirt again opened his eyes, burning and bursting, almost blinded, and stabbed with a million needle-points, fire-hot lances of pain. He looked up. The buzzards were lower—lower—scarcely above the smooth, ash-heap-like summit of Dead Angel Mountain; he could see the dull soiled black of their breasts, the spread unmoving wings, the repulsive, featherless, reptilian heads—almost the terrible eagerness in their cruel, death-hungry eyes.

Again, a furious, soul-tearing rage seized Dirty Shirt. "Gawd—Gawd—them—them—devils—of—hell! Them—them——" He gasped horridly, stranglingly, and the curses he hurled at the buzzards coming down—and down—were more a prayer than oaths. His soul was fighting; a rebel; even yet unconquered; refusing to

surrender to this thing that had reached out and got him and Solemn in its fiendish, relentless grasp.

Justice's bell jangled, violently, loudly.

"Jus—Justice—Solemn—Versus," Dirty Shirt muttered thickly, faintly, incoherently.

Then he remembered; he unclenched the hand still clinging to Versus: "Versus—go—on—*back*—Red Bluff! Back—go—on—go," he moaned.

Justice's bell clamored—and stopped—suddenly.

Dirty Shirt, with a terrible effort, turned his head and looked down into the little basin. Justice stood breathlessly still; her head turned aside, listening; her sightless eyes straining toward the summit of Dead Angel Mountain. A low whinny came from her trembling, distended nostrils. Dirty Shirt raised his own throbbing eyes in the direction Justice was looking. His breath stopped.

Two men stood at the upper edge of the little basin, looking curiously at Justice.

Dirty Shirt closed his eyes. It could not be; it was a trick of delirium, a cruel hallucination, a mirage. But once more, Dirty Shirt looked.

It was true! They were men. His dulling senses recognized one of them as "Mexican" Joe, a character about Red Bluff who worked, sometimes, at the borax mine. The other, Dirty Shirt did not know.

The men had not yet discovered Dirty Shirt. He felt himself slipping into that ocean of blackness; numbness.

"Here," he moaned, tried to shout. "Here!—Solemn—water—give—Solemn—yonder——"

Then, the blackness covered everything.

The heaven-sent taste of water was on his lips; moisture was in his throat, on his tongue, his fire-hot face, his forehead, when Dirty Shirt opened his eyes. The water came from the canteen in the hand of the stranger,

bending above Dirty Shirt. Mexican Joe was leaning over him, vigorously fanning Dirty Shirt's head with his sombrero. Dirty Shirt flung up his hand, angrily pushed the canteen away.

"Sol—Solemn—I—I—said," he choked with an almost wolfish snarl. "*Damn*—you—Joe! Solemn—I—said—yonder——" motioning feebly toward the other end of the slide. "Water—quick!—Solemn—I—said——"

His head dropped forward, his body slumped, and Dirty Shirt gave himself up to the exquisite dream that he was lying in a green, shaded canyon, beside a little mountain waterfall, from which the cooling mists gently sprayed upon his face.

Mexican Joe understood and obeyed.

Solemn's senses answered the reviving touch of water. He, too, opened his eyes. With his first consciousness, his blackened lips, by an awful effort, muttered:

"Dir—Dirty—Shirt—is he—— Water!—give him ——"

For the moment, no more could he say.

"Señor Dirty Shirt, he is O. K.," Mexican Joe replied reassuringly. "*Muy buena!* Drink, Señor—a little—*poco mas agua!*"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### PROVIDENCE USES AN EDITOR

Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith reacted quickly to the saving water, and the mental stimulus of the almost miraculous prospect of immediate rescue. Mexican Joe found the shovel while the stranger divided the contents of the canvas water-bag between Justice and Versus, and in a short time enough of the slide to permit Solemn and Dirty Shirt's release was shoveled over the basalt dyke, into the canyon below.

Blind white Justice and Versus, led by the stranger and Mexican Joe, carried the rescued prospectors down the mountain over the trail that, it seemed to Solemn and Dirty Shirt, they had come ages ago.

Two hours later, their bodies bruised and still numb, unable yet to walk, but, except for the shock, heat and exhaustion, not seriously injured, Solemn and Dirty Shirt were once more in their own restful camp at the oasis-like spring above Ground Hog Flat.

Mexican Joe was sent by the stranger to his and Joe's camp, on the farther side of Dead Angel Mountain, to bring the light automobile truck in which he would take Solemn and Dirty Shirt back to Red Bluff that night, leaving Joe to follow with blind white Justice and loyal little Versus.

The two faithful animals stood near by; Justice contentedly munching a pan of oats, and Versus, too, en-

joying a meal of the same delectable equine delicacy.

Not until then was the providential appearance of the stranger and Mexican Joe at the little basin on Dead Angel Mountain, at the head of Hydrophobia Gulch, at such a miraculously opportune moment—in the destinies of Solemn and Dirty Shirt—explained, or referred to.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt reclined on their blankets, still a little dazed, or excited, from their experience and suffering some from their bruised and long compressed bodies. The stranger, having rendered such first aid as was possible, squatted by one of the Joshua trees near them.

"I don't—know who you are," Solemn began, haltingly, speaking to the man who had come so unexpectedly and almost as a supernatural—sent savior to him and Dirty Shirt in their last, and up to that time, greatest extremity, "I—I—don't know who you are"—Solemn repeated—"but I do know we're both sure a whole lot obliged for you arrivin' so dog-gone handy just when Dirty Shirt and me were needin' somebody to show up so dog-gone seriously."

"We positively are much obliged," Dirty Shirt chimed in, "because if you and Mexican Joe hadn't showed up just when you did, I figure"—he hesitated and shuddered—"them darned buzzards would just about now be—well——"

Dirty Shirt left the rest of the sentence unspoken. The grewsome thought was too horrible to utter.

"Anyhow," he resumed in the momentary pause, "your coming was a mighty appropriate, providential, p-sy-chological coincidence."

"It sure as hell was 'sickological'——" Solemn began.

"P-sy-chological coincidence," Dirty Shirt repeated, glancing reprovingly at Solemn. "It's the first time Solemn and me have ever run into anybody, or had any-

body run into us up here on Dead Angel Mountain—or even in its neighborhood."

The stranger, a somewhat spare, slightly built, medium-aged individual, manifestly, from his appearance and looks, of some professional employment, chuckled softly. An expression indicating an appreciation of humor came into his dark, rather tired-looking eyes.

"I've been thinking of the somewhat unusual 'psychological coincidence' of the thing myself," he laughed, "and perhaps"—he went on—"it might interest you gentlemen, while you are resting and Mexican Joe has gone for the car, if I tell you the rather peculiar way in which it happened that we——"

"It would be interestin'," Dirty Shirt broke in eagerly.

"Yes, I'd like to hear it myself," Solemn added, taking a fresh chew of tobacco and handing the plug to Dirty Shirt.

"My name——" the stranger began, and hesitated. "It really doesn't matter—but, well, for the purposes of lucidity, my name is John Lewis Cramer, and my occupation—if any"—he laughed again—"is——"

At the mention of the name, Solemn and Dirty Shirt showed instant recognition.

"You write!" Solemn interrupted with great interest. "You write books. Dirty Shirt and me read one of your novels, *The White Tolteci.*"

"That's right!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, with equal enthusiasm and interest, "Mother Skillern let us have it. We read it on that city trip out to Hellbroth Oasis when we located the tungsten claim in Sodamint Canyon! It was a danged good story—I liked that part 'special where the white Indian, the 'White Tolteci,' knocked hell out of the feller that thought he was the whole works because he was a movin'-picture 'sheik' and considered practically all female girls insane and crazy about him——"

The novelist held up his hand; stopping Dirty Shirt's near-embarrassing flow of appreciation.

"*Try* to write, is better!" he laughed once more, answering Solemn. "And a lot of editors agree with me that *try* is about all!

"Because of one of those editors," he went on, glancing toward Justice, "and your faithful, sightless friend, we three are—here!" He paused, the twinkle in his eyes deepened.

"And yet," he proceeded, musingly, "if I should write the incidents of this morning into a story, associate my really lovable—even if great, and sometimes brutally frank—editor friend, in his New York office, with a blind white pack horse out in the lonesomest spot of the Nevada Desert; make them the joint instruments of Providence to bring about this happy situation in which we now find ourselves, and then laid the story on his desk, I think I know just about how he would react!"

For a moment, with silent chuckles, the novelist enjoyed the imaginary scene.

"It would be about like this," he continued. "He would glance over the script, catch its trend, get red in the face, 'scrootch' down in his chair, light a long black cigar, and say: 'For God's sake, Cramer, don't pull anything like this on me! Write something that *could* happen. If I printed this wild fantasy there'd be ten thousand "don't kid us" letters hit my desk within a week after the magazine was on the stands!' "

Once more the novelist paused and softly chuckled.

"Anyhow," Solemn remarked, "you showin' up when you did, sure spoiled a darned good meal for them cussed buzzards Dirty Shirt was talkin' about and which flew away when you and Mexican Joe arrived——"

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt broke in fretfully,

turning impatiently toward Solemn. "Can't you ever quit mentionin' uncomfortable reminders?"

Solemn and Cramer grinned.

"Yet, it is true," the novelist resumed, "that the editor I am thinking about, as well as that blind blessed white pack horse, has a very definite part in this episode. Nine days ago he called me into his office; instead of handing me the check I was expecting, he returned the manuscript of my last submitted story and, totally disregarding my sensitive feelings, dealt out one of his characteristic verbal chastisements. I think I can quote it, because I am sure I'll always remember it!

" 'Take it away,' " Cramer quoted. " 'Take it away, John Lewis! You're slipping, old kid! This stuff is the limit—rotten—flat! You're getting worse. The first thing you know you'll be doing this sloppy, modern, imported, neurotic, European sex-idiocy! This hurts me worse than it does you, John-boy, but you've got it coming! You've been in New York too long—it's getting you! Beat it! Get out! Go somewhere—West! Find the lonesomest spot on earth. Sit down on it!

" 'Look at real, honest-to-God things close up! Forget all this flapdoodle, hand-painted, make-believe thing we kid ourselves into calling "high-life," "civilization." Associate, if with anything, with—snakes—lizards—insects — coyotes — sandstorms — thunder — lightning—horntoads—Gila monsters—hydrophobia cats. Things that *are* what they are; wherever they are, whenever they are, whatever they are! Do that, John Lewis. Then write something for me; something that's got the taste of reality, of "it couldn't be otherwise" to it! Go on, now! Beat it! Get to hell out of here—and, *God bless you, old kid'!*"

As he finished repeating the one-sided conversation, Cramer leaned back against the Joshua tree, filled his

pipe and grinned in pleasant retrospection of the enlivening incident.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt smiled, too, at the vivid recital.

"He positively had a darned good command of language!" Dirty Shirt remarked admiringly.

"And also, some danged sensible ideas, it seems to me," Solemn added.

"He did—still has—will continue to have!" the novelist went on, still chuckling. "He is so blamed good—all around—that he made me mad! And I took his advice. The evening of that same day I was on the west-bound limited, and barely caught it, that pulled out of the Grand Central station at six-five P.M.

"In Los Angeles, I inquired for the 'lonesomest spot on earth.' The clerk at the hotel said: 'Barstow.' At Barstow they referred me to Red Bluff, which I reached yesterday morning. Some one there pointed to Dead Angel Mountain and said: 'That's it.' He also introduced me to Mexican Joe; so Joe came along to show me the way and cook our beans and bacon, make the coffee and open the canned tomatoes.

"At sundown yesterday, we camped on the other side of the mountain. Joe said he knew a place over there that was totally, entirely lonesome. Last night I thought he was a good guesser—that it was the 'lonesomest spot on earth.'

"This morning, desiring to achieve the ultimate of lonesomeness, and witness the desert sunrise—which, if I may digress long enough to tell you, I promise solemnly, humbly, that if I ever write again I will never try to describe—with Mexican Joe, I climbed to the mountaintop. We heard the cowbell. At first I thought some one had tricked me; that there was a dairy ranch on this side of the mountain. But the bell kept ringing

with such odd regularity, at such measured periods, with such insistency—as if it were trying to signal—that we decided to investigate. You know the rest!"

A breathless hush succeeded the novelist's narrative.

Hot as it was, Solemn and Dirty Shirt shivered; as they remembered the morning's horror.

Whimsically, Cramer recapitulated:

"If the editor had not scolded me; if I had not taken the train, that same evening, out of New York; if your loyal blind white pack horse had not stood in that one spot so patiently, faithfully, persistently, shaking her head, ringing her bell, well——" with a shrug of his shoulders, a wave of his hand, he indicated the too obvious result to mention.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt understood.

"I'm—*damned* glad—that editor gave you that bawlin' out!" Solemn muttered, fervently, his voice trembling a bit.

"I'm *damned*—glad—you—didn't miss that train!" Dirty Shirt added with equally earnest sincerity.

"To make it unanimous," Cramer responded, his own voice revealing emotion, as he arose and went to give the blind white pack horse some water, "I'm *damned* glad—that Justice so faithfully jangled her bell!"

## CHAPTER XXV

### A GAMBLING CHANCE

Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith sat up on their blankets and watched the blind white pack horse gratefully empty the canvas water bucket Cramer held before her. When she had drained the bucket, Justice whinnied for more.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt, by common impulse, looked into each other's eyes. No word was spoken. Yet there passed between them the mutual pledge that Justice would never again be a *"gamble-horse"*—a friendless, pitiful creature—a homeless, pathetic joke—to change masters on the turn of a card; a throw of the dice; the flip of a coin. The best oats, the most luscious hay, the greenest pastures, the coolest water were to be hers as long as she lived. Solemn and Dirty Shirt knew it. Just as they knew that Versus would never crave beans, and be beanless; wish for bacon rinds, and be denied her wish; bray for a bucket of beer, and be beerless.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt gazed into each other's eyes, understood and grinned.

Again they looked to where Justice was standing.

Cramer had dropped the canvas bucket; he was examining, intently, the sightless eyes of Justice. He turned, a little excitedly, toward Solemn and Dirty Shirt.

"In addition to my other—whims," he said, "the studying of horses' eyes—especially blind eyes—has been one

of my hobbies since my boyhood days on the farm. This horse has what a veterinarian would call 'heat-cataracts.' I'm sure a good surgeon could——"

He paused—to him Solemn and Dirty Shirt were but a pair of penniless, homeless "desert-rats," wandering vagrants of the waterless wastes. With a note of regret in his voice he finished: "Of course—under the circumstances—the cost of the operation would probably be prohibitive."

With a gentle caress of the dingy white hair on Justice's cheek, a low spoken, "I'm sorry, old girl!" the novelist turned away.

Once more Solemn Johnson's still swollen gray eyes met the yet aching brown eyes of Dirty Shirt Smith. One thought flashed to the minds of both:

Five hundred thousand dollars of unspent royalties from the borax mine, subject to their check, in the Los Angeles banks——The cost of an operation, to give Justice back her sight, "prohibitive"?

And again, Solemn and Dirty Shirt grinned, silently, understandingly, each at the other.

Around the far, wind-whipped shoulder of Dead Angel Mountain, Mexican Joe profaned softly, in musical Spanish, as he guided the sluing, skidding, pitching automobile truck over the slithering, sliding, shifting desert sands toward Solemn and Dirty Shirt's camp.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE SURPRISE

It was four weeks later. The hour was the restful one of early twilight. Three-fourths of a day's journey, as a burro walks, southwestward from the two-hundred-and-seven-population, one Chinese laundry, seven-saloon metropolis of Red Bluff, in the direction of Barstow, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith were camped for the night at a "dry camp" in a small depression, called, in the vernacular of the desert, a "wind-wash."

Dirty Shirt squatted by a little fire; in his hand he held a frying pan. Ever and anon, with a sudden deft upward—outward—downward—backward thrust of the pan, he tossed a flat, partially mature flapjack into the air. The potential delicacy would float gracefully up to the zenith of its orbit, hesitate, make a single semi-revolution, reversing sides with itself, and fall, with a slight "plop!" back into the pan.

Solemn sat near by and watched.

A few feet away, Versus stood idly chewing a dry, withered, yucca stalk and also watched.

"Sometime you're going to miss that blamed pan," Solemn muttered uneasily, his gray eyes following the flight of the flapjack, "and then things will be in an awful muss!"

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt retorted, flirting his head to whip the smoke from his eyes. "All you do is set there and criticize!"

"I ain't criticizin'," Solemn answered, "I'm just stating a scientific probability! No man can flip flapjacks indefinitely and not have one eventually flop!"

Dirty Shirt snorted disdainfully.

"I've been flippin' flapjacks—which you ought to be aware of, bein' as you've et half of them yourself—for nearly forty years and—*ain't—never—had—a flap—jack—flop—yet!*" he finished, timing his words perfectly with the exact movements of a youthful flapjack as it hurtled into the air, and performed its stunt.

With jerky motions of his head, keeping time also, with the flapjack's flight, Solemn's gray eyes had followed every phase of its journey. When it landed safely, again in the pan, Solemn grunted.

Dirty Shirt snickered.

"Some folks that set around wishin' a calamity would happen, get disappointed once in a while!" he said meaningly.

Solemn ignored the insult; stretched out his legs; leaned his shoulders against a small mound of sand and closed his eyes.

Dirty Shirt glanced around, noted the little hillock against which Solemn reclined, grinned, and continued flipping the flapjacks.

A piece of the dry yucca stalk on which Versus was chewing became lodged in her throat; she lowered her head, yawned, coughed violently, expelled the obstruction, picked it up and again started to chew it.

"That fool burro is going to choke herself, some day, if she don't quit eatin' dry yucca stalks," Solemn mumbled, without opening his eyes.

"She always strangles when she eats them," Dirty Shirt replied, carelessly, sliding a finished flapjack on to a tin plate, and pouring batter into the pan for another, "but still she keeps on trying it," he went on musingly.

"Female burros are like—movin'-picture actresses—there *ain't—no—tellin'—what—they—will do!*"

Dirty Shirt's flapjack accompaniment monologue was interrupted by a yell.

Solemn sat suddenly up.

"Something's bitin' me!" he shouted, clawing wildly at his clothing. "Something's bitin' me.—My Gawd!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you wasn't bein' bit up a little," Dirty Shirt laughed heartlessly. "You've been settin' on an ant hill. I saw you set on it!"

Solemn leaped to his feet.

"You saw me settin' on that ant hill?" he cried, his eyes blazing. "You saw me settin' there—and—and didn't mention it?"

"Every man can set on his own ant hill, as far as I'm concerned! That's my motto!" Dirty Shirt replied coolly. "Especially anybody," he went on significantly, "that's always wishin' somebody else would have an accident and flop a flapjack or something, can set on an ant hill, till he wears it out, if he wants to, and I won't interfere. Not in the least!"

"You—you saw me—settin'—on those ants?" Solemn spluttered, digging the insects out of his clothing.

"I saw you settin'," Dirty Shirt said calmly, *"and let you set!"*

Solemn lapsed into gloomy silence.

"Get the molasses out," Dirty Shirt finally said. "I reckon I've got flapjacks enough fried for supper!"

For a little while nothing was said.

Versus finished the dry yucca stalk and searched about for another, or something else equally interesting.

"That Doctor Lazzrop, that cut those 'heat cataracts' off of Justice's eyes, sure knowed his business, didn't he?" Dirty Shirt observed eventually. "I'm glad we took her down to Barstow and had him come out from

Los Angeles and do it. She'll be O. K. now, since she can see, normal again!"

"Yes," Solemn replied, "he was pretty scientific, and knowed what he was doin'! It was lucky we could hire pasture for her in that alfalfa meadow of Nate Randalls' at his 'Shot Gun Ranch,' too," Solemn added; "there's plenty of water and shade!"

"She ought to get fat——" Dirty Shirt began.

"She probably will," Solemn interrupted.

"It's been a hard trip, but——" Dirty Shirt began again.

"It was worth it," Solemn interrupted once more.

"I ain't sayin' it wasn't," Dirty Shirt retorted. "But I'm kind of glad to get back, just the same. Well, anyhow, we'll be in Red Bluff to-morrow P.M."

"Probably," Solemn answered.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### JOSHUA

THE following afternoon, Solemn and Dirty Shirt—as they had expected—arrived safely in Red Bluff.

After supper, the venerable prospectors, founders of the borax mine, and Red Bluff's highly esteemed ultimate examples of the idle rich, sat on the porch of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel.

An old-rose ectoplasmic exudation, heralding the rising moon, crowned the summit of Slaughter House Hill.

A rooster crowed.

"Guess Wong Gee's still got his new fightin' rooster, he got to take the place of Angel," Solemn observed idly. "Wonder if he's still got the other one.—The one he got for him to fight with?"

Dirty Shirt opened his lips and started to speak.

Another rooster crowed, in a different tone of voice, from the same direction, which was in the rear of Wong Gee's café.

"He's still got him," Dirty Shirt answered, "both of them!"

"You didn't need to say that," Solemn said briefly.

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt exclaimed. "Why didn't I need to say that?"

"I heard 'em crow, and knowed he had 'em," Solemn said.

Dirty Shirt flushed, and bit his lips.

The moon slowly pushed upward—a shining silver disk, flooding Red Bluff and the desert, silent as the ancient tombs of Troy, with mellow entrancing light.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt mutely watched the transformation.

From the top of Slaughter House Hill, by the side of Rattlesnake Canyon, came the shrill yelp of a coyote.

"I was wonderin' if it wasn't about time for him to howl," Dirty Shirt mumbled, half aloud.

"Joshua never misses howlin' when the moon comes up," Solemn answered quietly. "It seems like you ought to know it, by this time!"

Dirty Shirt looked around.

"Be you despondent, again?" he asked.

"If I do be, who cares?"

Dirty Shirt pondered a moment, before replying.

"Nobody," he said simply.

Once more the keen crescendo of the coyote's welcoming salutation, to the illumining queen of the heavens, vibrated through the clear monotonous air.

"He's done it again. That's twice," Solemn said.

"He'll do it again, in a minute," Dirty Shirt mumbled, taking a chew of tobacco. "Joshua always does it three times before he quits!"

Dirty Shirt had but barely finished speaking when, once more, even as he had prophesied, came the sharp, almost Galli-Curcian trill, as Joshua, Red Bluff's personal coyote, from the top of Slaughter House Hill, sent forth another pæan of thankfulness that the moon, as on previous occasions, had successfully achieved the feat of rising.

"There's something queer about that coyote!" Solemn muttered.

Dirty Shirt sniffed.

"As far as I'm concerned," he answered, "I don't see

anything queer about Joshua, or any other coyote! A coyote is a coyote; and Joshua's a coyote; and it's just as natural for him to be a coyote as it is for——"

A sudden intensive whinny echoed from the front of Saloon Number Four, as Versus, Solemn and Dirty Shirt's faithful, mouse-colored burro—who had an open *plus* unlimited, charge account for beer, at all seven Red Bluff saloons—stuck her head in at the door and ordered, in her usual manner, Ed or Chuck or whoever was on duty at the bar, to give her a bucket of beer.

"—as it is for Versus to be fond of beer!" Dirty Shirt finished inspirationally.

"Joshua ain't got but three legs——" Solemn began.

"Suppose he ain't. What's queer about that?" Dirty Shirt snapped. "It would be a blamed sight queerer if he had five—or even four and a half!"

"You don't see anything queer about anything!" Solemn complained fretfully.

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt retorted. "Just tell me something queer about something and see if I don't see it!"

"Well, for instance——" Solemn began.

"Go ahead. For instance, what?" Dirty Shirt challenged.

"Ain't it queer, for instance," Solemn resumed, speaking slowly, "that that coyote, named Joshua, is settin' up there on top of Slaughter House Hill, yelpin' at that moon; and that that burro, named Versus, is down there at Saloon Number Four, drinking that bucket of beer——" Solemn hesitated.

Dirty Shirt grinned; Solemn seemed to be stuck.

"—While Solemn Johnson," he resumed, "plus Dirty Shirt Smith—dry as they be; and goin' as they're goin' to be goin', out to Hellbroth Oasis to-morrow, to do the assessment work in that tungsten prospect tunnel, up

Sodamint Canyon, set here chokin'—*like a pair of danged old fools!*" Solemn finished triumphantly.

Dirty Shirt flushed, arose silently, and led the way to the hospitable door of Saloon Number Four.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### JUG-HANDLE JIM

At dawn, the next morning, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, with Versus, their faithful burro, began their three-day journey to Hellbroth Oasis, at the mouth of Sodamint Canyon, up which, a hundred yards—around a sharp turn—was the tungsten prospect tunnel.

As they climbed up the slope from Rattlesnake Canyon, headed out on to the Desert, and passed the borax mine—its massive machinery already, at that early hour, crushing, grinding, preparing the borax for market as the giant hoisting cages lifted ton after ton of the precious substance from the depths of the earth, Solemn and Dirty Shirt, without speaking, glanced casually toward the mine.

Each thought of the spring morning—several years before—when Dirty Shirt started to throw a chunk of rock at Versus' head—and didn't—with such far-reaching and unexpected results.

But neither Solemn nor Dirty Shirt thought, or at that moment so much as knew, of another event—an event of almost equally vital importance on their own lives, as well as in the lives and destinies of others, that occurred in the same springtime, of the same year, on nearly the same morning and at the same moment but miles—many—miles away.

Among the pines of Idaho, near the Payette Lakes, in a small cave under a granite ledge, on the precipitous

slopes of Jug-Handle Mountain, a Lady Bear who, the summer before, had had a romance, in the huckleberry region on the west side of Long Valley; and whose brief wedded experience was ended when Uncle Steve Robertson shot the bridegroom, shortly after the nuptial experiment, gave birth to a Little Girl Bear and a Little Boy Bear.

Six weeks later, which was equivalent to almost the exact moment Ed Keller was opening the initial barrel of beer in Saloon Number Four, in the sudden and vibrant metropolis of Red Bluff across the gulch from the, even then, busy borax mine, the Lady Bear died.

A 30-30 rifle in the hands of Jim Wessler was the cause.

The Little Girl Bear and the Little Boy Bear were—naturally—orphaned.

The Little Girl Bear bit Jim twice in the hand; she did not want to be caught. Jim swore. One blow from the barrel of the rifle and the Little Girl Bear was dead; her tiny skull crushed.

The Little Boy Bear climbed a tree. It was a small tree. Jim shook the tree; the Little Boy Bear clung to the swinging, slim balsam fir and cried—and wondered. Jim had an ax. It hurt the Little Boy Bear when the tree fell; it made him think it was dark.

When the Little Boy Bear waked up he was in a sack, with just his head—that was all—sticking out. Later, the Little Boy Bear took a ride.

"Tweenty-five dollar. Thatta all!" Tony Ferroloto, in the charming small town of Council told Jim. "Tweenty-five dollar for thas a-little Boy Bear. I buya heem. Maka da pet for my sweeta Little Girl, Angelina! She a-lika heem! She-lonesome since her sweeta mama die. Maybe, too, I teacha heem to do da movin'-pict' stoonts! But tweenty-five dollar—thassa all!"

"O.K.," Jim replied, laughing—that was twenty-two dollars more than Jim would get for the soft furry skin of the Little Girl Bear that was dead, and Jim was in business for business—with a touch of sentiment. "O. K., but name him 'Jug-Handle Jim'!"

"No, no, no!" Tony protested, "Juga-Handle Jim notta da good name for da Little Boy Bear—*Pepito*—thassa da good name for da Little Boy Bear!"

"I'm whimsical," Jim answered, "name him 'Jug-Handle Jim'—or—I take him away!" which Tony thought meant that Jim would butcher the Little Boy Bear, so he could sell the soft, silky skin.

"All-a right! All-a right!" Tony agreed hastily. "He's da—da—*'Jug-Handle Jim'!*"

So, the Little Boy Bear became Jug-Handle Jim, and so, also, in the months, the years, that followed, while the borax mine, across the gulch from the rapid metropolis of Red Bluff—out in the very heart of the treeless, barren, dreadful desert—was grinding out royalties for Solemn and Dirty Shirt, making them richer and richer, Jug-Handle Jim became a very large bear, a very wise bear, and a very good friend, indeed, to Tony's "sweeta little girl, Angelina," who, though her raven-black hair was bobbed; though her dresses were short, filmy and thin; though she had the ways—the thoughts—and the dreams of a maid in those romantic—thrilling—very young "teens"; still—even then, she was just, in her heart, a baby—Tony's "sweeta little girl, Angelina."

Entirely unaware of Tony—Angelina—Jug-Handle Jim, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, with Versus, their faithful mouse-colored burro, trudged on and on—and on—in the bake-oven heat, over the blistering sands of the desert, and three days later, at sundown, camped at Hellbroth Oasis, at the mouth of Sodamint Canyon.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### HELLBROTH OASIS

For some days Solemn and Dirty Shirt plus Versus, their devoted, noble small burro, had been camped at Hellbroth Oasis, a few yards from the tiny, small, seepage of clear water which when salt and pepper are added tastes like a thin but possible chicken bouillon; and which also, together with the one lone, rather dejected, dwarf piñon tree, the sole important vegetable manifestation at Hellbroth Oasis, provides the excuse for referring to Hellbroth Oasis as Hellbroth *Oasis*.

It was mid-afternoon, with no indications of rain.

Solemn sat in the shade of the piñon tree, curiously watching what seemed to be a small dust cloud that he thought flirted up, in occasional puffs, from among the hogshead-sized basalt boulders scattered over the low ridge—a spur of Resurrection Ridge itself—and which extends a quarter of a mile out into the blistering sand dunes on the other side of the mouth of Sodamint Canyon.

Sprawled on a blanket at Solemn's side, Dirty Shirt Smith slept heavily.

"Ain't that a dust cloud?" Solemn murmured.

There was no answer.

Only the sibilant noises made by one who sleeps came from Dirty Shirt's lips.

Solemn looked down in disgust and muttered:

"He looks like an old red-whiskered bear, sleepin' off a 'drunk!"

Dirty Shirt's whiskers rose and fell automatically over the wrinkled throat from which the coarse collar of his blue denim shirt had been thrown back.

Versus herself was dozing; her head and shoulders in the shade of the tree, the rest of her body—apparently in sheer perverseness—exposed to the glare of the sun. Solemn raised his eyes and looked at the calm, serene little burro.

"She's so contrary," he mumbled, "she'd stand with her hind end in the sun if it set her on fire!"

Even yet there was no answer.

Once more, Solemn squinted and peered at the place he thought there was a dust cloud.

Dirty Shirt stirred in his sleep, and smiled.

Solemn sneered.

"I bet the old fool is dreamin' he's a movin' picture sheik," he grumbled, contemptuously.

Two enormous red ants, at the edge of the blanket on which Dirty Shirt slept, fought furiously over a fragment of bean. Solemn glanced down. The battle attracted his attention. He stooped forward, picked up the ants, reached over, cautiously dropped the insects on to the exposed hollow just below the Adam's apple on Dirty Shirt's neck.

After which, Solemn settled himself against the tree, smiling slightly, closed his eyes and waited.

A moment later the silence was broken.

## CHAPTER XXX

### DIRTY SHIRT AWAKENS

"Ouch! Good gosh A'mighty! Danged if I don't believe a dog-gone ant is bitin' me!" Dirty Shirt Smith yelled, sitting up suddenly, clawing wildly at his breast.

"If an ant is bitin' you, and especially a Hellbroth Oasis ant"—Solemn replied calmly, without looking around—"believin' won't be necessary. You'll *know* it. *Ain't that a dust cloud over yonder?*"

"Dog-gone—I do know it! There's two of them—sufferin' centipedes! Ouch! One's in my bosom and one's down my back! Punch me between the shoulders," Dirty Shirt shouted, turning his back to Solemn.

Solemn smiled; sat up, doubled up his fist and punched.

"Did I squash it?"

"Umph! You—danged near—unjointed—my—spinal——" Dirty Shirt gasped.

"Ain't that a dust cloud over yonder?" Solemn interrupted.

"Ain't what a what over where?" Dirty Shirt flung back impatiently, taking a chew of tobacco, scratching his breast and trying to scratch his back.

"Ain't that a dust cloud over yonder on that spur of Resurrection Ridge, toward Pimento Sidin' cut-off?" Solemn repeated.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it ain't," Dirty Shirt snapped, removing part of the chew of tobacco from his mouth

and applying it to the place on his bosom where one of the ants had been biting. "Gosh dang those ants," he went on, twisting his shoulders, "here I was sleepin' good till——"

"Ain't that a dust cloud——" Solemn began again.

With sudden suspicion, Dirty Shirt glared at Solemn.

"If I thought there was any connection between those dog-gone ants and that so-called dust cloud you're ravin' about——" he broke in belligerently, then stopped as though it would take considerable thought to devise a revenge terrible enough to be adequate.

Solemn camouflaged with pretended indignation.

"Be you insinuating anything contemptible?" he demanded.

"Hit dogs howl!" Dirty Shirt retorted, trying vainly to reach the ant-bite between his shoulders. "And if the shoe don't fit they don't need to wear it!"

Solemn concealed a grin with a yawn.

"Ant-bites are a little bit extemporaneous," he replied, suddenly insultingly sympathetic and conciliatory, "and naturally"—his tone changed to sardonic delight—"they do get some people he't up considerable! 'Specially temperatural old red-whiskered centipede-squashers that ain't got any too much nervous control to start with, but—" again his tone changed—"if that ain't a dust cloud over yonder, I miss my guess! What in Sam Hill do you reckon it might be made by?"

While Solemn talked, a look of almost malignant fury came into Dirty Shirt Smith's usually smiling brown eyes.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### ONE ACCOUNT SETTLED

SOLEMN JOHNSON's conversational elasticity was too much for any red-blooded man who has just been bitten by two ants, at one time, in two places,—fore and aft, as it were,—to stand without an effort, at least, at retaliation. Dirty Shirt Smith was a red-blooded man; he had but recently been bitten by two ants, at one time, in two places,—fore and aft,—by two unusually efficient ants, and Dirty Shirt Smith erupted:

"It might have been made by a—a—elephant! It might have been a . . . *Dog-gone those ants!* . . . a—gyraffe! It might have been made by a hippopotamus! It might have been made by a burro! . . . *Dad blast those ants!* . . . It might have been made by a cow! It might have been made . . . *Confound those danged ants!* . . . by a—a—camel! It might have been made by a—a . . . *Gosh darn those ants!* . . . a bear—— But the chances are it was made by a blame fool coyote trying to dig out a prairie dog! But if you're so all-hell crazy to find out what it . . . Ouch! . . . might have been made by, why don't you go see what it was made by——*Damn those infernal ants!*"

Even Versus was surprised. She gazed reproachfully at Dirty Shirt; turned around, backed her hindquarters under the shade of the dwarf piñon tree, and stood with her head and shoulders exposed to the yellow, fiery rays of the afternoon sun.

"That's what I was contemplating doin'," Solemn said, quietly, "but I suppose I'll wait till the sun gets down behind Tombstone Range first, and in the interval," he went on, stretching himself on his own blanket, "I reckon I'll take a nap on my own hook!"

"Take it!" Dirty Shirt snapped, "and I hope to Gawd seventeen ants bite your old carcass for every one that's bit me——" he broke off suddenly, straightened up, and sniffed the air. "Seems to me like I smell a dog-gone rattlesnake around here somewhere!" he exclaimed, looking anxiously about.

Solemn raised his head and sniffed, also.

"It's just Versus, sweatin'," he said, lying down again. "She always smells similar to rattlesnake, when she sweats!"

"Personally," Dirty Shirt contradicted, "my opinion is, she smells more like Gila monster——"

"She smells like rattlesnake!" Solemn repeated doggedly. "Is that dust cloud still over yonder?"

Once more Dirty Shirt's brown eyes flamed murderously. He was beginning to feel that that dust cloud subject, in view of the ant situation, justified absolute homicide, and with that sort of an expression in his eyes he glared down at his tormenting partner.

At that moment Solemn was in imminent peril of being kicked in the face.

As if challenging fate, Solemn yawned, stretched and murmured insolently:

"Aw, hell, shut up! I want to go to sleep!"

Dirty Shirt's heavy, scorpion-proof shoe lifted, poised, while he selected a suitable place on Solemn's jaw to kick. Instinctively Dirty Shirt's hand sought his pocket; if he had a fresh chew of tobacco he could kick harder. He raised the plug to his mouth, it touched his lips—filling his nostrils with its rich pungent flavor. Solemn

Johnson was saved. Dirty Shirt suddenly remembered the night he and Solemn were pinned down under the treacherous slide of shale, at the head of Hydrophobia Gulch, on Dead Angel Mountain, and Solemn had given him all the tobacco he had. The anger went out of Dirty Shirt's eyes, they became again normally whimsical, humorous, tinged a little with melancholy. Dirty Shirt's foot lowered, once more to the ground.

"I'm goin' up to the tungsten tunnel and work some of this infernal ant-sting out of me," he said, slipping the plug of tobacco back in his pocket, "and as far as me interferin', you can sleep till you sleep your blamed old head off!"

Turning away, he trudged silently up Sodamint Canyon.

Solemn grinned. He had been watching Dirty Shirt's foot, though his eyes seemed to be closed.

"I knowed the old idiot wouldn't kick me!" he chuckled.

Sitting up, Solemn took a small, worn, memorandum book from his pocket, turned through the pages, paused at one, read what was written on it—hesitated—shook his head and turned to another. He grinned, nodding affirmatively as he read the entry:

*"Solemn Johnson Acct. Vs. Dirty Shirt Smith——*
*To me settin' on one ant hill, comin' back on trip to have Justice's eyes fixed, and him not tellin' me about it. . . ."*

Smiling broadly, Solemn took a pencil from his pocket.

"I reckon I can scratch *that* out," he chuckled. "Two Hellbroth Oasis ants are as—influential—as any forty other-breed ants on the whole dadblasted desert!" and he drew a line through the notation, wrote the word "Settled" across the page and again smiled, comfortably.

Turning his head he called after Dirty Shirt's rather stooped, slender figure as it moved swiftly up Sodamint Canyon:

"If you run acrost that elephant or gyraffe or hippopotamus or burro or bear or cow that was makin' that dust cloud you might catch him and——" Solemn's tongue suddenly balked; it flashed to his mind that he, perhaps, had made a tactical blunder by referring to a possible "cow" as a "him."

Dirty Shirt stalked stolidly onward, without looking back.

Taking a fresh chew of tobacco Solemn stretched out on his blanket, drew a deep breath and was soon sound asleep.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### IN THE TUNGSTEN TUNNEL

THE yellow sun traveled slowly, yet with inexorable certitude toward the age-old peaks of Tombstone Range.

Solemn Johnson, on his blanket beneath the dwarf piñon tree, near the small spring at Hellbroth Oasis, slept and perspired.

Versus, Solemn and Dirty Shirt's oddly loyal little burro, stood motionless, save for the occasional twitching of her bushy tail, or a flop of one long, drooping ear; her head and shoulders in the full glare of the sun, the rest of her person in the shade of the tree. She also slept, and she, too, perspired.

In the small tunnel—a dozen feet long, a third as wide, and half as high—where Solemn and Dirty Shirt thought there might be traces at least of tungsten, a short distance above the sharp turn in Sodamint Canyon, Dirty Shirt Smith worked indifferently, perspired freely, and swore frequently while the ant-bites gradually but entirely too slowly subsided.

Such was the ensemble at five-thirty P.M.

Already, Dead Angel Mountain, rising in terrifying, vegetationless splendor and loneliness out of the seemingly boundless, uncharted, ocean of wind-drifted sand, on the edge of Hellfire Basin—far to the northeast—was beginning to assume that shadowy, mysterious, in-

tangible, soft-tinted, purple-blue grayness that it always seemed to assume at that hour of the day.

The dim light in the small tunnel, in which Dirty Shirt worked, went out suddenly. Darkness enveloped Dirty Shirt. For an instant he was frightened. The thought flashed to his mind that the entrance to the tunnel had caved in—that the rocks had slipped silently, without his knowing it—shutting him off from the world, enclosing him, perhaps, in a living tomb. And again he remembered,—as he remembered when about to kick Solemn in the face—the agonizing experience while caught in the slide on Dead Angel Mountain.

Dirty Shirt whirled and gasped in amazement.

A bear was standing in the mouth of the tunnel!

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### DIRTY SHIRT RESOLVES TO RUN

DIRTY SHIRT was surprised when he saw the bear standing in the mouth of the tunnel. Up to that moment he hadn't dreamed that a bear was anywhere near.

It was a large bear. A very large, dark colored bear. It was panting; it was hot; saliva drooled from the long white teeth, from its red, dripping, lolling tongue; its head hung heavily downward; it looked tired—discouraged; but extremely large, and not a sound did it make save the thick, swishing pulsations of its deep breathing, as it panted with the heat and weariness.

The bear stood there—that was all; in the entrance to the tunnel, peering into the darkness.

And in the darkness, with the solid face of the tunnel dug in the low porphyry cliff behind him, stood Dirty Shirt Smith.

There was no egress to the rear; no exit upward; no escape for Dirty Shirt except through the one narrow entrance to the tunnel, and in that entrance was a bear! An unexpected bear that would easily weigh four hundred pounds.

Instantly Dirty Shirt decided what he would do. His mind worked with feverish haste; with unerring precision. He would yell! Certainly that was the thing to do. He would yell! He would yell loudly; he would yell as loud as it was possible to yell—louder than any man had ever yelled before. Yes. Even louder than

that, if he could. With that intention Dirty Shirt opened his mouth. . . . It wouldn't work.

Only a choking, gurgling, unnatural "Awrk-Gawrk!" came from his lips. But the effort started things. Opened the sluice-gates of articulation; stimulated the circulation of conversational desire. After that, he could talk—some—and Dirty Shirt talked, earnestly, anxiously, rapidly:

"Oh-h-h!—Awrk!—Oh, Gawd!—Get away—Shoo!—Bear!—Good lord!—Gosh A'mighty!—Scat!—Hey!—Whoop!—Shoo!—Get out!"

The bear stood perfectly still.

From outside the tunnel, behind the bear, came the sound of a voice; a strangling, incoherent, moaning voice; calling:

*"Jug-a-Handle Jim—please! Da wat'—Jug-a-Handle Jim——"*

The bear turned, wearily, slowly and went away from the entrance to the tunnel.

It was the tick of destiny for Dirty Shirt Smith.

Again his mind acted quickly. He would go out of that tunnel! Once out, he knew he could run; whatever else happened, if outside he could run. He would go out—*and run!* It was a blessed thought. The best solution to the situation. So, Dirty Shirt went out of the tunnel—slipped out—cautiously, but earnestly, on the heels of the bear.

And in the late afternoon shadow, flung by Resurrection Ridge, across Sodamint Canyon, Dirty Shirt saw the bear, a dozen steps from the mouth of the tunnel. On his knees, his hands clutching the rough harsh hair on the neck of the bear, a man—small and dark, and, as one could readily see, practically dead—smitten by the curse of the Mojave—was trying to pull himself up.

The bear, very tired, very discouraged-looking, seemed to be trying to help the man to his feet.

Again, Dirty Shirt changed his mind. Despite his resolution to run, he stopped. The man with his blood-shot, near-blind eyes—his cheeks already the purple-gray tinge of death—looked up; babbled heart-breakingly:

"Bless-a da Santa Maria! It is—a—da—Man! Please,—da—Mister—da wat'—da wat'! Tony is—a—die—— Juga-Handle Jim—be—a—good to da man. Da — da — nice-a Man wid — da — red — whisk' —— Please-a—— Da—wat'—— Juga-Handle Jim——" and he slumped, an inanimate heap, to the ground.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### SOLEMN AWAKENS

SOLEMN JOHNSON was awakened from his warm yet enjoyable siesta by a yell and a grunt.

The yell leaped from the excited lips of Dirty Shirt Smith; the grunt was the product of the shaggiest, most despondent and largest bear Solemn thought he had ever seen. Solemn opened his eyes, closed them, opened them again in an effort to prove to himself that he was not merely in the midst of an unusual somnolent hallucination.

He proved it. There was no mistake.

The bear was there.

"Wake up!" Dirty Shirt yelled. "You old yaller-whiskered Goddess of Laziness, and get some water! Quick! Here's your dog-gone—'dust cloud'!" Dirty Shirt finished, dumping the limp, unconscious form of the man he had half-carried, half dragged down Soda-mint Canyon on to his own blanket beside Solemn, beneath the dwarf piñon tree.

Solemn sat up suddenly.

"Good gosh A'mighty! What in Sam—— *Hell! I sucked my tobacco down my throat!*" he detoured disgustedly.

"Shut up!" Dirty Shirt barked. "Get some water and ask questions subsequent!"

Versus backed off, uneasily; her ears thrust forward suspiciously; her eyes wide—doubtful—as she stared

curiously at the queer visitors, particularly the bear, which Dirty Shirt had brought to camp.

For a moment Solemn hesitated, still bewildered.

The bear, like a big friendly dog, sat on his haunches beside the man who lay as if dead. Occasionally he pushed gently with his nose, at the motionless body; or turned troubled, inquiring eyes to gaze pathetically up into Dirty Shirt's face.

"Get that water, I told you, you old idiot!" Dirty Shirt snapped again. "Can't you see he's mighty nigh 'sun-busted' and dead!"

Solemn went for the water.

"It looks to me," Solemn retorted, bathing the unconscious man's face and dripping the water on to his lips, "as if he's already entirely 'sun-busted' and dead! For that reason"—resenting Dirty Shirt's impatient tone—"you don't need to get so all-fired excited and personal! But that bear—— Where did you find him?"

"I didn't find him," Dirty Shirt flung back; "he found me—in the tunnel!" He shuddered as he remembered his first sight of the bear. "But see if you can't get more water down his throat. You're spillin' it all over the blanket!"

## CHAPTER XXXV

### TONY

RAVING, temporary consciousness came to the victim of the dreadful, heat-cursed wastes:

"Da—wat'!" he mumbled. "Please-a Juga-Handle Jim—Finda da wat'! Da wat'—— Watcha out! Da—da—damn-a rattlesnake! . . . Angelina . . . my sweeta little Angelina! We finda her! Da—da—wat'—— Pleas-a—pleasa-a. We—finda—da—guy—da damna—'sheik'—that steala—that run-a way—— Da rattlesnake! Looka out—— Juga-Handle Jim! Ah—da—snake—— Da damna snake—— He bite-a Tony! Now—Tony—a—die! Juga: Juga-Handle Jim—killa—killa—— Please-a da wat'—— Tony is a-choke! Da wat'—— Please-a . . . my Angelina . . . my little sweeta——"

Horrible convulsions seized him; the madness of death was on him. He struck blindly—wildly—out into the darkness that was over him; he tore at his throat; the purple face grew almost black—brown, ghastly spots appeared on his cheeks; he clutched in frenzied agony at the soiled, rough hair of the bear, fighting to raise himself up. Suddenly he went limp; fell back, panting on the blanket.

Solemn looked at Dirty Shirt.

"He must have run out of water, over on Pimento Siding Cutoff, and headed across Poison Sheep Flat for Resurrection Ridge—thinkin' he'd hit a spring."

"And among those basalt boulders, where you thought there was a dust cloud," Dirty Shirt interrupted, "on that ridge across the mouth of Sodamint Canyon, where that rattlesnake bit Versus when she accidentally stepped on it—he was bit!"

"Bit?"

"Bit," Dirty Shirt repeated, "can't you smell the rattlesnake smell on him?"

"I thought that was Versus, sweatin'!" Solemn broke in.

"Versus smells like Gila monster, I told you, when she sweats!" Dirty Shirt retorted impatiently. "Besides, look at that leg—and his face!"

Solemn glanced down.

The right trousers leg was stretched tight, like a stuffed sausage; snakelike blotches mottled the purple-red flush of the face.

"Danged if that ain't right!" Solemn admitted, pityingly. "He sure has been bit! But what'll we do with him? It's gone so blamed long on him, already?"

"Can't do anything!" Dirty Shirt answered gruffly to conceal his own feelings. "The rattlesnake poison and the heat have already done it. If it hadn't been for the heat, he might have got over the rattlesnake bite; and if it hadn't been for the rattlesnake bite, he might have endured the heat, but both of them together is bound to be fatal! He'll be dead in a little while."

Dirty Shirt stopped abruptly.

The dying man's eyes opened; he looked up into Dirty Shirt's face:

"Tony—sick," he panted, his voice like a little hurt boy's in its pathos. "Tony—sick—like-a—da—da—hell! Tony—die—queek! Pleas-a, da Mister—Tony—geeva—da Juga-Handle Jim—da—nice-a bear to—da—nice-a man—with a-da-red whisk'——" his voice became almost

a mere whisper. "Juga-Handle Jim," he said, pulling at the bear, "liss'n—Tony—a-tell——da—nice-a man—with a—a—da—red whisk'—da—new boss! Liss'n—Juga—Juga-Handle Jim. Whata da—da nice-a man tella—Juga-Handle—Jim—he—do-a—he—do-a—whata da nice-a man say—— Be da—da gooda bear—da—da," his breath came faster, more faintly. "Juga-Handle Jim—*kiss*—kiss-a—Tony. My—my—Angelina—my little—sweeta girl—Angelina—runa—da—way. Da—da—sheik—da—damna sheik—da movin' da pict'—da—Holly—Holly. Juga-Handle Jim—kiss—kiss!"

The great muzzle of the bear—of "da Juga-Handle Jim"—touched, with almost the tenderness of a mother's lips. the mottled face that all at once became ash-gray—and cold. He moved his massive head slowly, wonderingly, caressingly over the still form of "Tony"; his huge paws dragged clumsily, uneasily, yet with marvelous gentleness at the motionless body, while from his throat came low whimperings, almost human in sound—like the whining of a little child.

For a time, neither Solemn nor Dirty Shirt spoke.

The last bright edge of the sun dropped suddenly into the jumbled peaks of Tombstone Range; in the blue shadow that was flung across the desert, the towering crags of the mountains stood out like gaunt silhouettes of the crumbling spires and battlements of ancient castles and cathedrals, stark and black, against a background of copper and gold. A small sunset breeze rippled over the sand dunes, shook the lifeless, heat-burned leaves of the few scattered yuccas, flirted up little eddies of dust and stirred the harsh needles of the dwarf piñon, at Hellbroth Oasis, until they rattled.

With a deep sigh, Juga-Handle Jim brought his head to a rest on the breast of the man who was dead.

The breeze died down; and there was silence.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### SOLEMN AND DIRTY SHIRT ALMOST QUARREL

THE quick shrill yelp of a coyote sounded from the low ridge across the mouth of Sodamint Canyon. It aroused Solemn and Dirty Shirt from the depressing reverie into which the death-agonies of Tony had plunged them.

"Why in thunder don't you start a fire and put the beans on for supper?" Dirty Shirt exclaimed roughly, but not roughly enough to hide the huskiness of his voice.

"In just a minute," Solemn answered, rising, going to his bed and drawing from among the blankets a single-action, 45-caliber, Colt's revolver of an early pattern.

"What you schemin' to do?" Dirty Shirt asked, surprised.

"Shoot that bear!" Solemn replied shortly.

"Are you crazy?"

"Anything as miserable as that bear is, ought to be shot," Solemn retorted. "It's a mercy to put him out of his unhappiness. Besides, what in blazes will we do with him if we don't shoot him?"

"Let that bear alone, and put that gun back!" Dirty Shirt snapped angrily. "Make a fire for those beans and—" he hesitated, glancing at the silent form on his blanket—"as soon as the moon comes up we'll have to dispose of that—that—corpse."

"We'd just as well shoot that bear first," Solemn began.

"If you mention shootin' that bear again," Dirty Shirt interrupted, viciously, "there's going to be the damndest disturbance take place here, that ever took place any place! Nobody's delegated you to shoot private bears and put things out of their unhappiness!"

"He's—sufferin'," Solemn persisted, "and ought to be shot!"

"Suppose he is sufferin'," Dirty Shirt snapped. "That bear's got just as much right to suffer as anybody else has, and not be shot for it! If everything was shot every time it's sufferin' you'd have been shot darn near every other day for the last nearly forty years yourself. That time you had that neuralgia, in your teeth, out at Arsenic Springs, for instance. You had a whole lot to say about 'sufferin',' but you didn't go around yellin' for me to shoot you."

"Well, I felt like bein' shot," broke in Solemn.

"You might have felt like it, but you was danged careful not to *mention* it," Dirty Shirt retorted scornfully. "And if I had shot you just because you was 'sufferin' ' you'd have been sore as hell about it! As far as that's concerned," Dirty Shirt went on feelingly, "I reckon I was sufferin' quite a bit myself, this afternoon, when them dog-gone ants was bitin' me on the bosom and between the shoulders simultaneous; but you didn't hear me jumpin' up and down beggin' somebody to shoot me and put me out of my dadblasted agony!"

Solemn grinned cautiously. Dirty Shirt's reference to the ants reminded him of a pleasant and successful experiment. And, anyhow, Solemn had had no intention of shooting the bear. But at the moment, he could think of no other way to start a quarrel with Dirty Shirt; and so, hit upon the happy idea of the threat to shoot Jug-Handle Jim, knowing that Dirty Shirt would instantly react with a violent argument, and the argument would

bridge the deep melancholy which the unhappy scene they had just witnessed had brought upon them.

"Put that fool gun up and make that fire for those beans," Dirty Shirt went on, "I'm going to give—Jug-Handle Jim—some water. He ain't had any only what he licked off the blanket when you was spillin' it on—that fellow's face!"

Solemn returned the gun to its place.

Jug-Handle Jim still crouched, motionless, panting and occasionally whining, above the body of Tony.

Dirty Shirt straightened up and called softly to Jug-Handle Jim:

"Come on—bear, and get a drink of water! You must be thirsty as—hell. So, come on." Jug-Handle Jim looked curiously at Dirty Shirt, but for a time made no response. "Come on," Dirty Shirt coaxed, "you—can't be of any more—value to—him! Come on—Jug-Handle Jim!"

When Dirty Shirt spoke his name, Jug-Handle Jim sat up on his haunches and turned his body slowly till he was facing Dirty Shirt.

"Nice bear—nice old Jug-Handle Jim," Dirty Shirt went on, flattered that the bear was showing signs of recognizing his authority. "Come on. That's the stuff! Get a good drink of nice Hellbroth Oasis water. Before long we'll go to Red Bluff—to-morrow—probably, and you can have some beer! Come on, Jug-Handle Jim. You're Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith's nice old bear now."

Solemn whirled angrily on Dirty Shirt.

"Who in blazes notified you that Solemn Johnson was part proprietor of that or any other fool bear?" he snapped, interrupting Dirty Shirt's wheedling, one-sided conversation with Jug-Handle Jim.

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt retorted. "Ain't we

partners? Ain't we been partners for nearly forty years?"

"Not on bears!"

"That remains to be concluded," Dirty Shirt flashed back. "Ain't we partners on the borax mine?"

"We be!"

"Ain't we partners on Versus, our faithful, four-footed, mouse-colored burro?" Dirty Shirt went on relentlessly.

"We be," Solemn admitted, grudgingly.

"Ain't we partners on that old white ex-blind pack horse named Justice that you gambled for sight and unseen and won off of Tom Shannon and which is now rusticatin' in alfalfa up to her belly down at Nate Randalls' Shot Gun Ranch, two miles and a half the other side of Barstow?"

Solemn flinched; he felt that Dirty Shirt was penning him.

"We be," he snorted defiantly. "But bears are different. It ain't logical to be partners on a dog-gone bear! Besides, that—that—poor cuss," he glanced at the still form on Dirty Shirt's blanket, "willed that bear to you, personal'! I heard him with my own ears; he mentioned your red whiskers 'special, and didn't say a blamed thing about my yellowish-gray ones!"

"It's as logical to be partners on a bear as it is to be partners on a burro—or for that matter, a borax mine—or even an old ex-blind pack horse; and you was danged particular in insistin' we be partners on her," Dirty Shirt argued back, doggedly.

"Justice—she's different," Solemn began. "She's——"

"She's our partnership old ex-blind white pack horse, and that's all the connection she's got with it," Dirty Shirt interrupted. "And as far as whiskers is concerned," he went on, "whiskers ain't got a darn thing to do with bein' partners on a bear! No old squinty-eyed

sand-shuffler is goin' to get out of being his share of a partner on a bear—and especially a bear like Jug-Handle Jim—just on a technicality over whiskers! And furthermore, if you want to argue about it——"

"Nobody's wantin' to argue about it," Solemn broke in. "I just won't go around leadin' the blame fool—the idea of leadin' a dog-gone bear around!"

"He don't need to be led," Dirty Shirt retorted. "Not half as much as—as—that poor devil we inherited him from needs to be buried! So, quit arguin' and build that fire for those beans. While I get Jug-Handle Jim some fresh water," he finished, picking up a pan and stalking away to the spring.

Solemn squatted by a pile of twigs, arranging the dry sticks for the evening fire. Once more he grinned.

When the near-quarrel ended Jug-Handle Jim got up and shuffled over to Solemn. Coming up behind him, he gently nudged Solemn in the back with his muzzle.

"You poor old son-of-a-gun," Solemn muttered pityingly, in a low tone, careful that Dirty Shirt should not hear; at the same time reaching up and patting Jug-Handle Jim on the side of his shaggy head. "You're huntin' sympathy, ain't you? Poor old devil! I'll bet you are lonesome as hell since he—he—— *Hey! Watch out—you cussed old moth-eaten idiot!* Who do you think you're shovin'," Solemn exclaimed, in simulated anger, as he saw Dirty Shirt turn back from the spring. "If you don't get this blasted bear away from here," he went on, as Dirty Shirt approached, "how in tarnation can I ever get this fire started?"

"Come on, Jug-Handle Jim," Dirty Shirt called gently to the bear, showing Jug-Handle Jim the pan of water. "Leave the old sore-headed horntoad alone"—looking scornfully at Solemn—"he ain't got any heart or sympathy—for bears—or anything, anyhow!"

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THE TOMB IN SODAMINT CANYON

JUG-HANDLE JIM gratefully and eagerly drank the water that Dirty Shirt brought, then lay down near where Dirty Shirt sat. Solemn fussed at the fire, preparing supper. Versus, still a little uncertain about the intentions of the bear, stood not far away and watched; after a time, her assurance returned and she came closer to the group at the camp.

The yellow moon edged up over the eastern rim of the desert, and for a little while there was silence.

"Are those beans about ready?" Dirty Shirt asked suddenly.

"Mighty nigh!" Solemn replied. "But I was thinkin'——"

"So was I," Dirty Shirt interrupted, "but the chances are, we was thinkin' different!"

"We probably were," Solemn answered, paused a moment and went on. "I was thinkin'," he repeated, "that even if the beans are done, somehow or other I ain't got much appetite for beans—or anything else—with him"—nodding his head toward the dead man, lying on Dirty Shirt's blanket—"layin' so close! For some reason, or other, eatin' don't appeal to me much—under the circumstances!"

The same thought had been in Dirty Shirt's mind.

The noxious smell of rattlesnake was still in the air;

mixed with the aroma of simmering beans, the reptilian odor became really, indeed, quite nauseous at times.

"My appetite ain't so all-hellish ambitious itself," Dirty Shirt said. "Maybe we ought to—dispose—of him before tryin' to eat!"

"That's one thing I was thinkin'," Solemn replied. "And it's got to be done so coyotes and—and—et cetera can't dig in and get at his—remains. I was wonderin'——" he hesitated.

"Probably there ain't much tungsten in that prospect tunnel, anyhow," Dirty Shirt suggested.

Solemn smiled to himself; he knew Dirty Shirt would get his own thought of the tunnel.

"That's what I was thinkin'," Solemn answered again. "It'd save lots of diggin' and, being in solid rock, a pretty safe place to put him. A couple of sticks of dynamite ought to blow in the front and fill up the entrance!"

"That's what I was thinkin'," Dirty Shirt replied, unconsciously parroting Solemn's own phrase. "He'd be secure in the tunnel, and with a few feet of rock closin' it up, buzzards nor coyotes, nor even badgers, couldn't get at him!"

"The moon is up now, so it is light enough," Solemn began.

"But we ought to see if he ain't got any identification on him before the—the—funeral, hadn't we?" Dirty Shirt interrupted once more.

"That's one thing I was thinkin'," Solemn repeated again. "I'll get the lantern and light it, so we can see good, and you can examine him before we carry him up to the tunnel."

A moment later Solemn and Dirty Shirt stood by the dead, already swollen, body of Tony. The yellow flare from the lantern threw an uncanny, sickening light on the upturned face.

"I'll hold the lantern," Dirty Shirt offered, "you can—examine—him!"

"Never mind," Solemn quickly replied, "I'll hold it myself! You see if he's got anything in his pockets to tell who he is!"

"Well," Dirty Shirt agreed reluctantly, "but it ain't going to be a very agreeable job! Anyhow, the chances are, he's already throwed everything away—like he has his coat—the same as they always do when they're 'sun-busted' and delirious with thirst— But I'll look in his pants pockets!"

Gingerly—hastily—Dirty Shirt ran his hand into the pockets of the dead man's trousers.

"There ain't a thing in 'em!" he said, straightening up. "Not even a knife. He's throwed everything away!"

"Ain't there a pocket in that shirt?"

"There's a pocket," Dirty Shirt answered, stooping over again, "but it's flat—empty—— No, there's something in it—pinned in. Hold the lantern a little lower down!"

Dirty Shirt drew something from the pocket and straightened up. "It's just a picture," he said, holding it to the light so Solemn could see. "Just the picture of a—woman," he muttered, as he and Solemn squinted their eyes at the photograph of a girl, probably fifteen—possibly sixteen years of age.

"She's kind of good-lookin', ain't she?" Dirty Shirt added.

"Pretty young. Sort of 'babyish-lookin'! Any writin' on it?" Solemn asked.

"Not a scratch," Dirty Shirt answered, turning the picture over and examining it, "not a danged word! Wonder if she ain't that girl, 'Angelina' he mentioned?"

"She might be," Solemn replied, "but that ain't important! We'd better get him"—glancing down, again,

at the dead man—"disposed—of as soon as possible. The dog-gone ants are already startin' to work on him!"

An hour later, two heavy, throbbing jolts, like a slight earthquake shock, shook Resurrection Ridge, as two shots of dynamite, one on each side of the entrance to the small tunnel in the low porphyry cliff, exploded. There was a rumble of sliding rock, and Tony's tomb, in the pale solitude of Sodamint Canyon, was sealed forever.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### VERSUS VS. BEANS

JUG-HANDLE JIM watched, curiously, the strange, lonely, yet not unsympathetic, burial of Tony, his late, beloved master. As if he understood, meekly, humbly, patiently he followed Solemn and Dirty Shirt as they went silently, thoughtfully back down Sodamint Canyon, through the brooding moonlight, to the camp by the dwarf piñon tree at Hellbroth Oasis.

"Those beans are probably cold again," Solemn observed as they approached the camp. "More than likely the fire's gone out while we were—buryin'—that feller."

"You can heat them up again in a minute," Dirty Shirt replied.

Solemn stooped over the pot on the coals where the fire had been. "Well, I'll be dog-gone darned!" he exclaimed, angrily. "The kettle's empty. That cussed Versus has et 'em! She's et every solitary bean!"

"Et 'em all?" Dirty Shirt ejaculated.

"Et 'em entirely!" Solemn snapped. "Teetotally, personally and collectively et every blamed bean! Et 'em beyond redemption! Confound her measly old sun-baked hide!"

"We'd ought to have fed her before we had the—funeral," Dirty Shirt answered quietly. "It was past her supper-time and we'd ought to have known she'd eat 'em. You'll just have to fry some bacon and warm

up the coffee. It's too late to cook more beans now."

Versus stood in the shadow, behind the piñon tree, and silently watched Solemn—profanely—prepare another supper.

Dirty Shirt got out his fiddle and sat down, with his back to the piñon tree; Jug-Handle Jim slumped in a great melancholy heap beside Dirty Shirt.

Pensively, Dirty Shirt began sawing out the first lonesome, and when Dirty Shirt rendered it, unusually lonesome notes of *Home Sweet Home*. The effect on Solemn was electrical.

"For Gawd's sake," he shouted furiously, "put that *damned* thing up! Ain't it despondent enough around here without that fiddle wailin' like the screech of a lost soul in hell or purgatory or somewhere?"

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt flung back, still playing away on the rather decrepit instrument. "I thought a little music would be appropriate. Gosh A'mighty! Look at that!" he exclaimed excitedly.

Jug-Handle Jim had gotten up and, weary as he was, began a clumsy, shuffling dance; keeping time, in the shadowy moonlight, as well as possible with Dirty Shirt's amateurish performance.

It was a pitiful spectacle.

It was as if Jug-Handle Jim was trying to show Dirty Shirt—by answering his music—even in the hour almost when his dearly beloved Tony had been taken from him, that he transferred his obedience, his allegiance, if not his whole-hearted affection, to this "nice-a man with da red whisk'," whom Tony, in his dying agony, had commanded him to serve, to "be-a good to" and "do-a whatta he tell."

"That danged bear's educated!" Dirty Shirt cried.

"That fool fiddle ain't," Solemn snapped back viciously. "Put it away and quit that infernal sawin'.

I ain't in any humor for hearing it squeak to-night! Also, tie that bear up. He's too tired to be cavortin' around like that! Besides, if you don't tie him up he'll run off!"

"Jug-Handle Jim ain't to be tied up," Dirty Shirt answered, yielding however to Solemn's demand that he stop playing. "I'll quit fiddlin'—temporarily—but Jug-Handle Jim is not going to be tied up! He's a free moral agent and if he wants to run off—which he don't want to do—he can run off! And if he wants to stay—which he does—he can stay! And if he wants to go with us to Red Bluff, to-morrow, where there's plenty of nice cold beer; he can go with us to Red Bluff, to-morrow—where there's plenty of nice cold beer!"

Dirty Shirt tried his best to be definite.

From the low ridge, across the mouth of Sodamint Canyon, came again, for the second time that evening, the weird, shrill yelp of a coyote. Solemn and Dirty Shirt exchanged glances.

"He's disappointed," Solemn muttered dryly, enigmatically. "He knows that *he* can't—get—at—*him!*"

Dirty Shirt nodded, understandingly; remembering the wedge of rock that blocked the entrance of the small tunnel, in the porphyry cliff, up Sodamint Canyon.

"The bacon and coffee is ready," Solemn announced.

A little while later, only the monotonous crunching of Versus' teeth, as she stood behind the dwarf piñon tree and chewed on the bacon rind which Solemn had tossed her, broke the silence of the brooding, mysterious night that overshadowed Hellbroth Oasis and the seemingly measureless desert sleeping—as if in eternal rest—beneath the myriads of twinkling, diamond-like stars and the white, mirror-bright moon.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### OLD BOB IS SURPRISED

THE first rose-flame of dawn barely tinted the eastern sky, the following morning, when Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith plus Jug-Handle Jim plus Versus turned their backs on the dwarf piñon tree at Hellbroth Oasis. Silently, they left behind them the raw fresh wound, in the low porphyry cliff, where the mouth of the tunnel, up Sodamint Canyon, had been scarred by the dynamite shots, which made secure the place of Tony's final earthly repose. Each with his—in Versus' case her—own unspoken thoughts, they swung out on the long, three-day shuffle, as the burro travels, across what would soon be the blistering, fire-hot sands of the desert and headed toward the two-hundred-and-seven-person, one Chinese laundry, one borax mine, seven-saloon metropolis of Red Bluff.

At two-forty-five P.M., three days thereafter, Dirty Shirt flicked the perspiration from his face, took a chew of tobacco and said:

"At this lick, we ought to be there by sunset!"

"Probably!" Solemn replied, laconically, brushing the sweat from his own gray eyes, and jabbing Versus with the get-up stick. "What'll we do with that danged bear when we do arrive?"

"Let Jug-Handle Jim work out his own—destination!" Dirty Shirt snapped.

While they were still on Prairie Dog Flat, at four-ten P.M., a smoke-like cloud was observed in one particular place, on the horizon.

"Do you know what I think?" Dirty Shirt exclaimed and paused.

Solemn looked, with a provoked expression, at Dirty Shirt.

"How the hell do I know what you think? Unless you say it?" he flung back.

"I think," Dirty Shirt exclaimed, again, "I can see the dust cloud from the borax mine!"

"I've been seein' it quite a while!" Solemn replied shortly, punching Versus again. "But I didn't get excited about it!"

At that time, Versus quickened her step.

Jug-Handle Jim ambled along, with a steady, rhythmic swish of his gigantic feet as they splashed through the sand.

At six-fifteen P.M., Solemn, Dirty Shirt, Versus, Jug-Handle Jim, emerged from Rattlesnake Canyon. On their left, some distance away, was Burro Butte; to their immediate right, the black face of the basalt cliff—which was the north exposure of Slaughter House Hill—rose sheer and glistening, fifty feet straight in the air, from the mucky pond, at the base of the cliff, which caught the drainage from the borax mine. Against the sky, on top of Slaughter House Hill, the deserted cabin, at one time occupied by the butcher, and the cluster of five or six scrub piñon trees, near which it was built, was outlined sharply against the sky.

Directly ahead, was the wide, single-sided street of Red Bluff.

Versus swung sharply to the left, at the end of the street, heading, unhesitatingly across the open ground behind the business buildings of Red Bluff, toward Solemn

and Dirty Shirt's small but cozy shack nestling at the foot of the sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four.

Old Bob, Mother Skillern's loyal and only tomcat, was watching at a hole, midway between Solemn and Dirty Shirt's cabin and Wong Gee's café, as Versus and the others came into view.

"Wonder what those automobiles are doin' in front of Mother Skillern's hotel?" Solemn observed questioningly, glancing in that direction.

"It's my impression," Dirty Shirt replied, hastening after Versus, while Jug-Handle Jim shuffled along near by, "they're probably another one of those movin'-picture outfits, from Hollywood, on what they call 'location.' Maybe if it is," he went on, "we can watch them 'shootin'' to-morrow. Gosh," he added, eagerly, "I'll be glad to get a fresh glass of beer!"

"I ain't going to fool with beer," Solemn retorted. "It's too slow—I thought I saw Old Bob settin' by that gopher hole," he finished, glancing around.

"He was settin' there a minute ago!" Dirty Shirt answered.

It was at that moment, that Mother Skillern, unaware of the arrival in Red Bluff of Solemn and Dirty Shirt, Versus and Jug-Handle Jim, said:

"Good lord! That fool cat's seen something!"

## CHAPTER XL

### VON DE VINCENT IS SURPRISED

MOTHER SKILLERN'S startled exclamation followed the sudden, disheveled, wild-eyed appearance of Old Bob at the door; his unbelievably rapid skid—between Mother Skillern's feet—and on, across the dining-room floor to safety beneath the sideboard in the corner of the room, and his pathetic, inquiring "Meow!" as he turned around and peered out from under his shelter.

Mother Skillern was right.

"That cat" had seen something; something more terrifying, even, than Angel's, Wong Gee's ex-fighting rooster, ride on "that cat's" back, quite a while ago.

Old Bob had seen—that is, he thought he had seen—a dog. The largest dog in existence; indeed, larger than any dog had a right to be. One look at Jug-Handle Jim, and Old Bob decided that, personally, he wasn't interested in gophers. Gophers could go hang. What Old Bob wanted to do was to go home. And he went. Suddenly, unexpectedly, entirely.

Mother Skillern witnessed Old Bob's arrival.

At the moment, she was performing the hospitalities of supper-time to an assortment of Hollywood stars, near-stars, etc., which the great Von de Vincent, director of super-spectacular five-reel thrillers, for the Colossal Cinema Corp., Ltd., Hollywood, Paris, Berlin, London, Petrograd, New York and occasionally, Red Bluff,—

which assortment of stars, etc., the great Von de Vincent had assembled that afternoon, on "location," in Red Bluff.

It was practically inevitable that Mother Skillern should spill the plate of soup, which she held in her hand, down the great Von de Vincent's spinal column when Old Bob arrived. Such being the case, she did.

The plate of soup down his spinal column was a surprise to the great Von de Vincent. Immediately, he got up from the table and said:

*"My God, woman, you spilled that soup down my back!"*

Mother Skillern looked at the great Von in amazement.

She knew, very well, where that plate of soup had gone. She saw it go. The thing was so obvious that it seemed impossible that any one, and especially the great Von de Vincent, should release such an inane observation.

"Of course I spilled that soup down your back," Mother Skillern replied a bit sharply, a little impatient that the great Von had considered it necessary to tell her something that the most casual observer should have known that she already knew.

"Certainly, I spilled that soup down your back," Mother Skillern repeated, "and if that darned cat had gone between your legs as unexpected as he went between mine, you'd have spilled something yourself. Sit down, and I'll get you more soup!"

But by then, the great Von de Vincent had recovered his poise; that perfect self-balance of which he was proud. With a courtly, "society," "dress-set" bow to Mother Skillern, he replied, reseating himself at the table:

"Thank you, Madawm, but I have had sufficient soup for the present!"

A riffle of appreciation rippled around the room.

## CHAPTER XLI

### RAVIOLO ARRIVES

At the moment the plate of soup went so completely down his back, the great Von de Vincent was in a deep study. He was extremely perplexed. He had three terrific anxieties. They were:

Raviolo Mondejo plus a gallon jug of freshly made Hollywood moonshine whisky, "Arlene Druesy," and a conversation.

Gloomy forebodings, dreadful memories, unhappy anticipations were in his mind when Old Bob arrived so suddenly and Mother Skillern spilled the soup down the great Von de Vincent's back.

Yet, even while he was sunk in the abysmal depths of mental confusion and doubt, the great Von's salvation was at hand. In the persons of Jug-Handle Jim; Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith, the solution of the triple dilemma, taxing the faith—and the mind—of the great Von, was already in Red Bluff.

The same providence that sent Tony and Jug-Handle Jim to Hellbroth Oasis and so to Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith; that sent Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith and Jug-Handle Jim to Red Bluff, while Old Bob was watching for the gopher, when he saw Jug-Handle Jim; that sent Old Bob, so feverishly, into the dining room of Mother Skillern's hotel—and so, with such astonishing suddenness between Mother Skillern's

legs; that sent the plate of soup down the great Von de Vincent's back, was directing these same actors in the drama that would solve the problems resting so heavily on the great Von de Vincent's mind.

But the great Von did not know it. Nor did Solemn or Dirty Shirt know it; or Jug-Handle Jim, or Arlene, or Raviolo, or even old Henry Lurkins, Sr., head of the Colossal Cinema Corp., Ltd., and the author of the conversation in question, himself.

Yet it was true.

When the soup complication developed, the great Von was remembering the conversation which Old Henry Lurkins, Sr., had handed him, on the studio lot, in Hollywood, the morning before.

On the long drive from the cinema capital of the world to Red Bluff, in the midst of the desert, for the final "thrill shots" of *The Sheik's Revenge,* his next—and probably last—stupendous production, each time the great Von looked at the back of the luxurious, though small, sedan, just ahead of his own high-powered limousine, and in which Raviolo Mondejo, the world's most tempestuous, audacious, silver-screen lover, and Arlene Druesy, and the gallon jug of Hollywood "moonshine" whisky rode, the great Von de Vincent remembered that miserable conversation. It was a bitter thought. The conversation, Arlene, Raviolo and the jug of whisky, the whole works, was a bitter thought.

The great Von had urged Raviolo against both Arlene —scarcely more than a child—and the whisky.

"You're taking chances, Raviolo," the great Von had said, "and besides, it isn't necessary to take whisky—especially bootleg hootch—to Red Bluff."

Raviolo exercised his right as a great "sheik-star" of the screen to interrupt haughtily by interrupting haughtily:

"Go take a walk around yourself," he told the great Von de Vincent, "and see if you're still there! Never mind about the girl. And as far as 'hootch' is concerned, I'm running no risk of a shortage—not a risk! Besides, that *old, musty,* stale whisky they've got out at Red Bluff hasn't got the TNT push to it the fresh stuff that Jack makes has got! The hicks out in that country don't know good liquor. So, I'll take my own—private stock! Get me—*private* stock!"

"Then leave Arlene Druesy at home——"

"No!" Raviolo snapped, "I picked that Kid up, in Idaho last winter, when Nick had us up there, shootin' the snow scenes in *Frozen Love,* and I'm going to hang on to her—for a while! Sooner or later"—Raviolo frowned—"she'll get wise that Raviolo is just as fascinating off the screen as he is when the 'kleigs' are hitting his eyes!"

The great Von de Vincent dreaded scandal. If Raviolo's wife found out about the "star's" "personal" interest in Arlene—well, *muck!*—another blot on the fair, frequently misunderstood escutcheon of Hollywood. Also, probably he, for allowing it, and Raviolo—for doing it—would both retire, by request, from Filmdom.

"Hell," the great Von said hopelessly, "I wish I'd never given Arlene the 'call' for the 'innocent maiden' in *The Sheik's Revenge.* She's too young—and hasn't had experience enough. I'd ought to have brought Mayme along for it in the first place! But you——"

"Insisted!" Raviolo broke in with a laugh. "And Arlene will play it. She'll also ride in my sedan, to Red Bluff! When the scenes are shot she'll be on the set, and before this thing is over—leave it to Raviolo—she'll have all the 'experience' any 'innocent maiden' needs to have to play anything!"

The great Von de Vincent, be it said to his credit,

wanted to choke Raviolo—but Raviolo was the "star" of the picture and, as often men do, the great Von sacrificed his personal feelings to his—art.

"Your wife'll start something——" he began again.

Once more Raviolo interrupted haughtily.

"Ha! Ha!" he said.

And Arlene, as Raviolo had said that she would, rode to Red Bluff in Raviolo's sedan. There rode also, with them, the gallon jug of Hollywood "moonshine" whisky.

Raviolo's stubbornness, the jug of moonshine whisky, Arlene, the conversation of the day before with Old Henry, all were surging through the great Von de Vincent's mind at the time of the unfortunate soup sequence.

But particularly the conversation. The great Von was reciting it, mentally, word for word. He knew it by heart—he could even see Old Henry Lurkins, getting more and more excited as the conversation proceeded:

*Old Henry*: "What's the matter? What's the matter, Ikey? (To his intimates the great Von was known by the diminutive of his original first name—"Isaac.") Three times now already these last pictures have been—flops! What's the matter? You t'ink I'm a First National Reserve Bank? You t'ink I'm making pictures for pleasure? Twenty-seven t'ousand eight hundred and ninety tollars you squander on that last million-dollar extravaganza super-feature 'knock-out,'—*She Shot Him Twice!*—and what is it? A flop—a—ge'fizzle—a—a—freeze-up! Oy, oy! Pretty soon, I'll have to have a bankruptcy to buy gasoline!"

*The great Von*: "My Gawd, Abe! What do you expect—from the kind of stories we're gettin'? The authors ain't writing anything worth a damn, Abe!"

*Old Henry*: "Sure they ain't, Ikey! They never was —— But what's the author, anyhow, Ikey? Not'ings! The director, Ikey, should be the brains! Why talk

about 'authors'? That's what I got directors—continuity writers—gaggers—for, Ikey! Thirty-seven fifty a week I pay that Jim Scully to make up continuities—and all der papers and magazines and comic sheets to get from the—inspirations yet! A hundred tollars a week I pay Ikey Rippstein, the great Von de Vincent, to director what Jim makes up! A hundred tollars a week—Oy, oy! —to Raviolo! And he used to drive 'taxi' for a tollar a day and five per cent! And send you with five cars on location and a lot of 'atmosphere extras,' at t'ree—five—seven-fifty—ten tollars a day apiece and der hotel board! And them hotel bills, Ikey—them hotel bills!—what you think I'm making pictures for, Ikey? For *vacations,* Ikey? Twenty-seven t'ousand dollars for a million-dollar super-feature and it turns out a—flop—a liability—a loss!"

*The great Von*: "But the authors. The 'nuts' ain't writing anything new! They ain't got any original ideas."

*Old Henry*: "Sure, Ikey, they ain't! They never did have! But why der authors, Ikey? Again, Ikey, it is der director makes der picture, Ikey? For that I pay der director, not der author. Der 'author' iss—'blooey'! Not'ings! A hundred tollars a week, oy, oy!—and for 'flops,' Ikey! No, Ikey! Not any more! What do I care, Ikey, for der goluf pants? Der leather-puttees? For der cap turned backward—or pareheaded—it don't make any difference! Or der sport shirt?—Or der horn-rimmed glasses, Ikey? Not'ings! Not for them do I pay a hundred tollars a week. No, Ikey! Put some—'stuff'—some 'punch' in der pictures! Vat der public vants, Ikey—'thrills'—'hair-put-uppers'—'sex-businesses'—it is them, Ikey, der public vants. Put them in it, Ikey! Once more, Ikey, *The Sheik's Revenge* you can shoot. And if it is a 'flop,' Ikey, a—ge-fizzle, Ikey, back

to der 'Suits and Pants Pressed While You Wait,' for you, Ikey! Oy! Oy! Three 'flops'—in a row!"

*The great Von*: "But, Abie, the damned authors——"

At that moment, Mother Skillern arrived with the soup.

While the soup was in progress, Rhetta Rovelle, matronly blue-eyed widow; old-time "stand-by extra"—"parts"—and "bits" attaché of the studio lots, now doing the innocent maiden's aunt in *The Sheik's Revenge*, entered the dining room of Mother Skillern's hotel. Rhetta's smooth cheeks were flushed with anger, as she took her place at the table.

"That poor child, Arlene—baby is all she is," she said indignantly, "is up in her room crying her eyes out with headache—and—things! When we get in off this location, I'm going to take her to live with me in my apartment. She needs some one—with a heart—to look after her!" And Rhetta's motherly blue eyes blazed at the sheik of *The Sheik's Revenge*.

She gave Raviolo Mondejo what, in the vernacular of the "lot" would be called "a dirty look" and which, no doubt, is intended to mean an ocular expression of supreme contempt.

But her look was lost on Raviolo.

Using another quaint phrase of the studios: *"He never blinked a winker!"*

## CHAPTER XLII

### JUG-HANDLE JIM TAKES A DRINK

LONG before the episode of the soup in the dining room of Mother Skillern's hotel had subsided, Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, in front of their cozy shack nestling against the sand ridge behind Saloon Number Four, had jerked the pack from the back of their faithful mouse-colored burro.

While Solemn and Dirty Shirt de-cargoed Versus, Jug-Handle Jim investigated the interior of the shack. Convinced that the place was headquarters for his new masters and friends, Jug-Handle Jim decided that he, also, would make it his home.

As soon as possible Solemn and Dirty Shirt turned their steps toward Saloon Number Four. Jug-Handle Jim shuffled along behind them. Versus, herself, headed rapidly toward the Seventh Oasis, eager to tell Ed to give her some beer.

Colonel Spilkins was standing at the bar, in Saloon Number Four, when Solemn and Dirty Shirt, closely trailed by Jug-Handle Jim, appeared.

"My—my—Gawd!" Colonel Spilkins exclaimed.

Dirty Shirt looked up and grinned.

"It ain't a vision, Colonel," he said reassuringly to his and Solemn's old friend. "That's Jug-Handle Jim! Solemn and me got him out at Sodamint Canyon. Ain't he a dandy and a whopper?"

"His previous owner was rattlesnake bit and died," Solemn added simply. "We buried him in the tungsten prospect tunnel. Put up your gun, Chuck, he's gentle!" he told the bartender who had reached for the forty-five on the back bar as Jug-Handle Jim came in.

"He—he's—a whopper, all right!" Colonel Spilkins mumured a little unsteadily. "But—for a minute—I'll admit I was—er—startled!"

"Well, I hope Perfect Alibi, my polecat, nor none of his children, see him too sudden!" Heterogeneous Saunders, who was drinking with Colonel Spilkins, observed, studying the gigantic bulk of Jug-Handle Jim. "Things might be undone worse around Red Bluff," he went on, "than they was when that Horace Duranto was undone. I sure hope Perfect Alibi, nor 'his' family, meet him unexpected!"

"Jug-Handle Jim wouldn't hurt them," Dirty Shirt laughed naïvely, ignoring entirely Heterogeneous' suggested cause for uneasiness. "We walked right up on Old Bob, Mother Skillern's tomcat, a little while ago and —well, Old Bob went home, but Jug-Handle Jim didn't mind him at all! He's mild!"

Jug-Handle Jim edged closer to the bar, stuck up his nose and sniffed.

"Want a drink, Jug-Handle Jim?" Dirty Shirt crooned.

Jug-Handle Jim reared up, between Solemn and Dirty Shirt, put his great fore paws on the bar and sniffed more eagerly still.

"What does he drink?" Chuck asked.

"Blamed if I know," Dirty Shirt replied, "we ain't had him but three days and ain't had a chance to find out. Try him on beer," he suggested. "That's what I'm drinkin'—first!"

Chuck glanced at Solemn.

Solemn jerked his thumb toward the Bourbon bottle. Chuck understood, slid the bottle of strong liquor on to the bar in front of Solemn; drew a large glass of beer and set it before Dirty Shirt.

Jug-Handle Jim sniffed at Dirty Shirt's beer; drew back, shook his head, growling suspiciously.

Jug-Handle Jim had a reason.

Dirty Shirt's beer reminded Jug-Handle Jim of a bottle of stuff that smelled the same way, but was loaded. Always before, stuff that smelled like that, had been good. But that time—it was hot. Jug-Handle Jim knew; he drank it. It made him think he was on fire, inside of himself. The stuff that made it so hot was Tobasco sauce; an entire small bottle full, with which some one—to have fun with Jug-Handle Jim—had loaded the bottle of beer; then, in the guise of a friend, treacherously given it to Jug-Handle Jim. Trustful and innocent, Jug-Handle Jim drank it—without thinking. But he thought—afterward. He thought his total large stomach was hot. And it was; hellishly hot. And it was a long time before it quit being hot.

The Judas-like beer betrayal had happened the winter before; in the lovely small town of Council, among the pine-clad hills of Idaho, when Jug-Handle Jim, his beloved Tony and Tony's still more—if possible—beloved "little sweeta girl, Angelina," were happy; before sorrow came to Tony and Jug-Handle Jim and they became wanderers—searching for Tony's "little sweeta—runaway—girl Angelina." Ever since, when Jug-Handle Jim sniffed the odor of beer, he remembered the hotness of that other deceitful bottle of beer and the laugh—the gleeful—Jug-Handle Jim thought, fiendish—laugh of the one who had given the bottle to him.

Jug-Handle Jim couldn't tell Solemn or Dirty Shirt.

But that was the reason he spurned the beer in front

of Dirty Shirt; sniffed the whisky in the small glass before Solemn; reached over, clasped the bottle of Bourbon in his gigantic paws, tilted it up to his mouth, settled back on his haunches, and before the eyes of the astonished audience drained it utterly. After which, Jug-Handle Jim sighed contentedly and dropped the bottle on to the floor.

"He's got better judgment than I gave him credit for having," Solemn ejaculated laughingly.

Dirty Shirt felt a little humiliated.

"What the hell's that got to do with eatin' supper?" he snapped. "I thought you was so tarnation hungry for some of Wong Gee's ham an' eggs!"

"I be," Solemn retorted shortly. "And I'm goin' to get them—right now! We'll be back in the future, Colonel. Come on, Jug-Handle Jim, you must have a whale of an appetite after the size of the drink you took," he finished with a chuckle, as he, Dirty Shirt and Jug-Handle Jim started for Wong Gee's café.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### RED BLUFF WELCOMES JUG-HANDLE JIM

After supper, Solemn and Dirty Shirt, with their unusual protégé, started consistently at Saloon Number One and eventually, about the time the moon was bathing Slaughter House Hill with a flood of silvery splendor, they arrived, promptly, according to schedule, at Saloon Number Seven, lovingly called the Seventh Oasis.

In a way, it was a triumphal procession.

Red Bluff welcomed Jug-Handle Jim; Solemn rejoiced in Jug-Handle Jim's persistent disdain for beer; Dirty Shirt was happy in Jug-Handle Jim's ready obedience to his commands to perform for the edification of the congregations, encountered along the way. Things were pleasant.

"He'll do any blamed thing I tell him to," Dirty Shirt announced proudly, in Saloon Number Six, just prior to their departure for the Seventh Oasis, their next and final stop on the evening's tour.

"Make him turn a somersault," Slim Breeden, the bartender, laughed.

*"Spaghetti!"* Dirty Shirt snapped sharply.

Jug-Handle Jim turned a somersault, sat up and looked questioningly at Dirty Shirt for further instructions.

The crowd was astonished.

"You didn't tell him to turn a somersault," Tom Shannon, who had wandered in, exclaimed. "You said *'Spaghetti'!"*

Jug-Handle Jim glanced at Tom and turned another somersault.

"That's the funny part of it!" Dirty Shirt laughed. "You've got to know how to translate what Jug-Handle Jim understands. Solemn and me discovered it, the second night we had him, while we were camped at Arsenic Springs. Solemn said he was danged near hungry enough to eat a dish of 'macaroni,' and Jug-Handle Jim heard him, laid down and rolled over! Then I said, personally I'd just as soon eat a dish of shoe-strings or fish-worms as macaroni, or for that matter 'spaghetti' either. Jug-Handle Jim heard me say *'spaghetti'* and turned a somersault! Then we began to experiment. Watch him!"

*"Macaroni!* Jug-Handle Jim!" Dirty Shirt commanded.

Jug-Handle Jim lay down and rolled over.

*"Tobasco!"*

The great bear got up, stood on his hind feet and wrestled playfully with Dirty Shirt.

*"Garlic!"* Dirty Shirt ordered suddenly.

Jug-Handle Jim dropped to the floor, stretched out, lay motionless; pretending he was dead.

*"Spumoni!"* Dirty Shirt snapped.

Jug-Handle Jim sat up on his haunches, put his front paws together, bowed his head on them as if praying.

"Gosh," Slim, the bartender, laughed, "he must have been educated in an Italian restaurant. His program sounds like a bill-of-fare!"

"'Tis unusual, but it's—effective," Dirty Shirt answered.

"Tell him to 'ravio'——" Tom started to suggest.

"For Gawd's sake, don't say it!" Dirty Shirt broke in hastily. "While we were experimentin', out at Arsenic Springs, Solemn said—it—and Jug-Handle Jim danged

near went crazy! We thought he was going to kill Solemn and me both, and maybe even Versus, before I happened to think and yell *'spumoni!'* at him. That seemed to soothe him—but don't say 'ravio'—that to him! His previous proprietor must have taught that to him for a fightin' word!"

A few moments thereafter Solemn and Dirty Shirt, with Jug-Handle Jim, started for the Seventh Oasis.

## CHAPTER XLIV

### "MY GOD! THINK OF YOUR WIFE!"

WHILE Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith were eating their ham and eggs, in Wong Gee's café, and later revealing Jug-Handle Jim's unusual attainments to the interested throngs in Red Bluff's several—seven—invitations to inebriation, other things were happening in the vicinity of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel.

The great Von de Vincent, having finished his dinner, pushed back from the table, arose, bowed to those who yet dallied with their dessert, coffee, cigarettes and light talk, and strode out on to the porch of the hotel. For a little while he leaned moodily against a post of the porch, in renewed depression, as he watched the evening shadows thicken over the grim and desolate desert.

Upstairs, in the room above the hotel office, Arlene Druesy—partly the innocent cause of the great Von's low mental state—lay on her bed, her eyes tightly closed, her head throbbing, her heart aching with loneliness—and self-reproach.

Raviolo Mondejo, the lithe, trim-loined sheik of *The Sheik's Revenge,* emerged from the same door through which the great Von had come and discovered him, standing there, leaning against the post.

"Why the 'Napoleon-crossin'-the-Delaware' frown, old Stick-in-the-Mud?" Raviolo chided lightly. "Heavy stuff, eh? Dopin' out—'*soup*-er productions!' Ha! Ha!

Rawther nifty, eh, what?" he finished, amused at his own conversational subtleness.

The great Von de Vincent paled.

Raviolo's accenting of "soup" was uncalled for; at least—untimely. For an instant a rebuke hung on the great Von's tongue. But he stifled it. Matters were too serious for levity.

"Have you still got that gallon jug of moonshine hootch in your sedan, Raviolo?" the great Von asked abruptly.

"Still!" Raviolo flipped back pertly; again clever.

The great Von studied for a moment.

"Well, you can keep the hootch, Raviolo," he said, firmly, "although it's as senseless to bring booze to Red Bluff as it would be to—to—take coveralls to Venice! You can keep the hootch," he repeated stubbornly, "but I'm going to switch that—girl—Arlene out of that innocent maiden part and put Edythe Lovelock in it. I ought to have brought Mayme along for it in the first place!"

Raviolo looked at the great Von scornfully.

"Nary a switch of the innocent maiden!" he laughed carelessly. "My contract reads that I, Raviolo Mondejo, in person, can name my own opposite leads——"

"But, Raviolo—My God, think of your wife!" the great Von de Vincent broke in. "Think what'll happen if your wife gets wise to the layout you're framing. She'll raise hell! She wouldn't mind Edythe since she is married herself. But the way you pull these sex-clinch scenes, Raviolo, you get too raw sometimes and if your wife sees the pre-view with this chicken doing the innocent maiden against your sheik-action she'll—— Well, you know what scandals have done to a lot of higher-priced people than you, in Hollywood, Raviolo!"

"My wife! My wife!" Raviolo answered impatiently, dramatically. "Why remind one of unpleasant subjects,

Old Kill-Joy? Heavens! I say, Old Top," he went on, assuming an air of reproachful, dignified resentment, "you're becoming a blawsted bore, don'cha know, on the unfortunate topic of 'my wife! my wife!' Cawn't you let—bad enough alone? Desist, I pray you, Old Deah, from any fawther refferawnce to 'my wife—*my wife'!*"

The window of the room over the hotel office was open; the voices of the great Von de Vincent and Raviolo were incautiously earnest, distinct.

The slender slip of a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl—Arlene—lying on the bed, her head pulsing from the heat and worry, her heart palpitating with loneliness, heard the entire conversation. She sat up and listened.

"The dirty—dirty—dog!" she cried, pressing her hands to her burning eyes. "The ornery—nasty—thing! Oh, I wish I'd never run away from Daddy—Daddy Tony! I wish I was dead—I wish I was dead!" and she threw herself, sobbing, down on the bed.

"Climb down, Raviolo—and think it over!" the great Von replied sharply, to Raviolo's outbreak. "And just remember—Old Henry Lurkins won't stand for much more—'muck-publicity' from among his stars! And that isn't all: There's got to be some hotter stuff, in thrills and stunts—some snappier shots—in *The Sheik's Revenge* than we've got in any picture we've been featuring you in yet, or you, nor me either, won't have any more contracts than—than—an author has a chance of knowing his own story when Jim Scully gets through turning it into a continuity, and I get through shootin' it! Just remember *that!* A job driving a taxi may appeal to you, Raviolo, but the great little Von de Vincent ain't choking with anxiety to go back to 'Suits and Pants Pressed While You Wait'!"

"Ha! Ha!" Raviolo replied, again derisively.

The great Von de Vincent turned silently, almost hope-

lessly, away; stalked down the steps of the porch of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel, and strolled thoughtfully, grimly up the wide single-sided business street of Red Bluff.

Raviolo turned also, but toward the stairway in the office of the hotel. He lightly hummed snatches of Oriental ballads, as he went up the stairs. His thoughts were of a moonlight drive—over the desert, with just Arlene—and himself—in the small sedan. . . .

He did not hear the light footfalls that followed him softly, rapidly up the steps. He raised his hand and tapped on Arlene's door. Another hand, slim and white, was laid firmly, none too gently, on his shoulder. Raviolo whirled and looked into the blue, honest eyes of Rhetta Rovelle, just as a girlish voice sounded fretfully from within:

"Who—who's there? What do you want? Come in!"

"It's just Auntie Rhetta, bringing you a cup of hot tea, dearie," the widow answered before Raviolo could speak. Her clear, fearless eyes looked into Raviolo's with an unspoken command; she nodded sharply toward the stairs. As if operated by some unseen mechanism, Raviolo went silently down the steps.

The great Von de Vincent, after leaving Raviolo, walked slowly, morosely the full length of Red Bluff's single wide street. He passed, indifferently, each one of the saloons on his way. He walked on and on, beyond the livery stable, beyond the old sheep corral, far out into the shadowy, starlit desert. There in the silence, he stood and thought. A coyote yelped suddenly, shrilly, from somewhere out of the darkness. The great Von de Vincent whirled about and quickly retraced his steps.

At the door of the Seventh Oasis, he was stricken with a vivid, unusual thirst.

Thus it happened that when Solemn Johnson and Dirty

Shirt Smith, having finished their exhibition of Jug-Handle Jim's cleverness, in Saloon Number Six, entered the welcoming door of the Seventh Oasis, the great Von de Vincent sat—alone—despondently, at a table in the corner of the main auditorium of the brilliantly lighted saloon.

The great Von was still brooding; still concerned with the problem of thinking up a new stunt, an exceptional thrill, a "biff-bang-boom" "knock-'em-dizzy" shot to inject into his forthcoming production, *The Sheik's Revenge.*

"My God, my God!" he mumbled, half-moaned, to himself. "No wonder directors of 'million-dollar' superfeatures are usually—practically always—hairless, nervous, more or less mental wrecks!"

## CHAPTER XLV

### "CHEERIO!"

THE great Von de Vincent sat with his eyes closed in study, when Solemn and Dirty Shirt, plus Jug-Handle Jim, came quietly into the Seventh Oasis.

For a little time, the great Von was unaware of their presence.

But the flurry of excitement which Jug-Handle Jim's appearance produced roused the great Von, and he opened his eyes. His first impression was that Solemn and Dirty Shirt were a pair of wandering strollers, vagabonds of the waysides, roaming the country, picking up a precarious livelihood by collecting what few pennies, nickels or dimes they could from exhibitions of the amusing and harmless antics of their trained bear.

Almost indifferently, the great Von watched Dirty Shirt put Jug-Handle Jim through his repertoire—from "Macaroni" to "Spaghetti',—and repeat the performance three—several—times.

The peculiar words, which Dirty Shirt used as commands—or cues—to Jug-Handle Jim to do his stuff, intrigued the interest of the great Von. He repeated them over silently, in his mind, noting Jug-Handle Jim's response as Dirty Shirt uttered the words aloud. While doing this, and watching Jug-Handle Jim unerringly perform his various feats, the great Von de Vincent had a sudden, tremendous inspiration. In his excitement, his

clenched fist struck the table; from his lips there leaped a joyful:

*"My God, it's a wow!"*

The great Von acted instantly, tactfully, suavely, generously. A few moments later—for twenty-five dollars for the trio, per day—Solemn, Dirty Shirt and Jug-Handle Jim, particularly the latter, became "extras" in the cast of *The Sheik's Revenge.*

When the great Von told Solemn and Dirty Shirt that each of them, and Jug-Handle Jim as well, would draw an eight dollars and thirty-three and one-third cents check per shift on the set of *The Sheik's Revenge,* Solemn looked at Dirty Shirt and winked; Dirty Shirt looked at Solemn and winked. The resident Red Bluffians present, all of whom knew Solemn's and Dirty Shirt's financial status, looked at one another and grinned. Only one, however, mentioned his thoughts and that was Ed, the bartender, who smiled and said:

"Gosh, Solemn, that's good wages. You and Dirty Shirt ought to save some money out of an income like that!"

Which, naturally, convinced the great Von that he had indeed been generous. But he knew that if his plans worked out Old Henry Lurkins, himself, would consider it money well spent.

While negotiations were in progress and the great Von de Vincent was giving Solemn and Dirty Shirt their instructions, Jug-Handle Jim sat on his haunches, at Dirty Shirt's side.

Jug-Handle Jim was unhappy.

These new, strange, human associates were friendly, kind, more than—hospitable—in indulging Jug-Handle Jim in whisky, his favorite beverage since his betrayal with a bottle of Tobasco-loaded beer; still, in his heart there was loneliness.

Pleasant, gentle as was the voice of Dirty Shirt Smith —"this nice-a man with-a da red whisk," in spite of that, it did not have the thrill for Jug-Handle Jim—although he obeyed it—as had had the voice of his beloved Tony, hushed and forever silent in the dark, lonely tomb out in Sodamint Canyon.

Jug-Handle Jim—drunk though he was—wanted Tony; the voice of Tony; Tony's caress; or the voice or the caresses of Tony's lost "little sweeta girl Angelina."

And while Jug-Handle Jim was sitting, on his haunches, at Dirty Shirt's side Raviolo came.

After his effective dismissal—by Rhetta—from the door of Arlene's room, the upsetting of his plans for a moonlight ride on the desert with Arlene—alone—Raviolo stood for a while on the porch of Mother Skillern's hotel, himself in a mood almost as unpleasant as the great Von de Vincent's had been.

At last, with a murmured—to himself—"Come out of it, Sheik!" Raviolo started on a tour, of his own, of Red Bluff's seven saloons—saving the jug of Hollywood moonshine, in his sedan, for—future references.

Raviolo arrived at the Seventh Oasis just as the contract between Solemn and Dirty Shirt and Jug-Handle Jim, and the great Von de Vincent, was being sealed with a final drink in which the entire audience of the Seventh Oasis participated—at Solemn's and Dirty Shirt's expense.

Raviolo announced his arrival himself, with an all-embracing, happy-go-lucky:

"Cheerio! All you old booze hounds!"

At the sound of Raviolo's voice, Jug-Handle Jim looked quickly around. His tired eyes fastened themselves on the newcomer with a strange, intense scrutiny.

Dirty Shirt and Solemn saw the great back slowly arch upward; the shaggy bristles raise; the thick lip curl back

—away—from the long white teeth, in a threatening, sinister snarl.

Dirty Shirt spoke to Jug-Handle Jim, who quieted partly, but still watched Raviolo with baleful, menacing eyes.

Raviolo's "cheerio" greeting to the congregation, in the Seventh Oasis, ended abruptly as his own startled eyes saw the huge form of Jug-Handle Jim. Raviolo's cheeks went white. He stopped, looked anxiously about, took an involuntary backward step, as if to retreat, and said, uncertainly:

"Who—who—*owns* that—bear?"

"These two gentlemen," the great Von de Vincent replied, indicating Solemn and Dirty Shirt.

"We be his proprietors," Dirty Shirt spoke up proudly. "His previous possessor got rattlesnake bit and died—and willed him to us!"

"The man that—that did own him—is—is—dead?" Raviolo questioned hesitatingly.

"He's dead," Solemn put in quietly.

Raviolo drew a breath of relief; but still kept his eyes on Jug-Handle Jim, and was careful, also, not to go too close to the bear.

"We're going to use him in the picture, to-morrow," the great Von told Raviolo gleefully. "It'll be the biggest——" he broke off shortly. "You look pale!" he exclaimed. "Take a drink and then I want to talk to you. We'll go down to the hotel! I want to go over the action with you; I'm changing the continuity!"

Raviolo took the drink; and another.

After which, followed by the intense, earnest glare of Jug-Handle Jim's searching brown eyes, Raviolo and the great Von turned toward the door.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt watched them leave the Seventh Oasis.

Dirty Shirt scratched his head thoughtfully. "That feller," he said, gazing after Raviolo, "reminds me of somebody"—hesitating an instant, his eyes brightened—"I know who he reminds me of," he exclaimed, "that Horace Duranto that Perfect Alibi practically undone that time when he—caught him! He does look a little like Horace, don't he?" Dirty Shirt finished, grinning as he recalled Horace's experiment in capturing Heterogeneous Saunders' polecat—quite a while before.

"He resembles him some—in some ways," Solemn replied, "but that Horace Duranto just looked like—and was—a darn smart-Aleck fool! But this feller"—Solemn finished, glancing after the retreating figure of Raviolo—"looks more to me like a dirty, dog-gone crooked snake-in-the-grass than an idiot—like Horace did!"

"He does look sneakin'er," Dirty Shirt agreed, adding, "but didn't Jug-Handle Jim act funny when he saw him?"

"Both of them acted funny," Solemn replied. "There must be something behind it, somewhere!"

There was, indeed, something behind it.

The instant he heard Raviolo's voice when he laughingly shouted "Cheerio!" through Jug-Handle Jim's brain—charged though it was with numerous, generous shots of potent Red Bluff whisky—there echoed the sound of a cruel, and Jug-Handle Jim considered, fiendish laugh, which he had heard months before while so awfully hot inside of himself, after drinking that bottle of Tobasco-flavored beer.

That laugh had registered itself in Jug-Handle Jim's mind as permanently, as ineffaceably, as had the memory of the fiery, hellish conflagration which raged within him as soon as he had swallowed the beer.

Jug-Handle Jim knew the owner of the laugh was the owner of the hand that had so treacherously given him

the bottle, pretending in traitorous friendship, that it was cold, refreshing, legitimate beer, when in reality—as Jug-Handle Jim discovered—it was the most unearthly *hot*—anything—he had ever thoughtlessly poured down his throat.

Long ago, Jug-Handle Jim had resolved that if ever again he heard a voice that sounded like the voice of the laugh, he would do something to it. In fact, he would do everything to it that he possibly could; and Jug-Handle Jim knew that he could do a lot.

When Raviolo Mondejo appeared in the Seventh Oasis——

Well, the gentle, restraining command of Dirty Shirt Smith—the "nice-a man with-a da red whisk" whom his beloved Tony had told him to obey—caused Jug-Handle Jim to postpone, for the present, something he was awfully anxious to do.

## CHAPTER XLVI

### HOT DOG SHOT

As THEY emerged from the Seventh Oasis, and turned their steps, through the sweetly solemn desert night, toward Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel, the mental conditions of the great Von de Vincent and Raviolo Mondejo were exactly opposite—precisely reversed—from what each had been earlier in the evening.

The great Von was jubilant. His despondency had left him. His depression was gone. The horrible memory of Old Henry Lurkins' cruel, almost threatening conversation had departed. In its place was hope. Big plans. Something the great Von eagerly anticipated.

It was Raviolo who was now worried; anxious, uneasy.

"Those old barnacles said that—that—bear's former owner was—was—dead, didn't they?" he asked haltingly, as if afraid he had misunderstood.

"Yes," the great Von replied cheerfully, "that's what they said! They buried him themselves out in the desert, at a place they call Sodamint Canyon. But that ain't important," he went on, enthusiastically. "The main thing is that I've got the biggest idea for a 'knock-'em-stiff-an'-drag-'em-out' thrill scene in *The Sheik's Revenge* that was ever put on the screen! We'll stop in here"—they were opposite Wong Gee's café—"and get a cup of coffee, while I tell you about it and explain the change in plot and action!"

Raviolo's spirits revived—a little—when the great Von confirmed Dirty Shirt's statement that Jug-Handle Jim's previous owner was dead. But the look of relief that crossed his face was followed by a shadow, as they dropped down at one of Wong Gee's spotless tables and ordered coffee.

"Has that—that—bear got anything to do with this big idea of yours?" he asked a bit unsteadily.

"That bear's got a hell of a lot to do with it!" the great Von de Vincent answered with a laugh. "He's going to put the hottest wallop into *The Sheik's Revenge* that was ever pickled in a camera, and I don't mean I'm foolish! That bear's half of the big idea, Raviolo—and you're the other half! You're going to help him!"

Raviolo flinched; but silently awaited details.

"You know how the story runs in the continuity," the great Von went on eagerly. "It's like this:

"You've sheiked the innocent maiden—Arlene—and got her to run away from her father's home, a cabin in the hills—she's a mountain girl, and motherless. Her old man's a queer old duck. He trails you; finds her in your camp; persuades the girl to go back. She goes back.

"You make up your mind to steal her—kidnap her—and get revenge; you sneak up to her dad's cabin, when the old stiff is away; you grab her as she opens the door; she fights; squalls. You run with the innocent maiden in your arms; her old uncle comes, unexpectedly from behind the cabin—he's been out chopping wood, and you didn't know it. He chases you; catches up with you. You drop the girl; you and the old uncle have a hell of a fight on the edge of a cliff. You lay him out; pick up the girl again. Then there comes the 'climax-twist,'" the great Von paused to light a cigarette, and went on:

"The innocent maiden throws her arms around your

neck; snuggles; smiles into the camera; registers adoration—*all in with love*—and says:

" 'My Hero! I only went back home with pa to see if you loved me enough and had sufficient—backbone—to come and steal me again! Oh, I am so happy—— My Hero! *My* Hero!'

"You clinch. Fade-out on edge of cliff; distant sky background," the great Von finished swiftly.

"What's wrong with that?" Raviolo asked.

"Nothing," the great Von de Vincent replied laughingly, as he sipped his coffee. "It's good stuff; great action! Two men having a fight on the edge of a cliff is always a sure-fire shot. The 'rube' public eats it up!

"But the great Von de Vincent is going to give the dumb-bell world something bigger yet; something no other director has ever had the brains to think of or the nerve to tackle. Something that's never been seen on the screen; and when Old Henry Lurkins sees the 'thrill-shot' I've got figured out for the last sequence of *The Sheik's Revenge* he'll go wild!

"A hero and a villain gougin' each other's eyes out, on the edge of a dizzy cliff is 'feature' plot; but I'm going to make it worse than that! I'm going to show 'em something that'll jerk 'em out of their seats; that'll make even the 'loges' howl for more——"

"What the hell are you planning?" Raviolo interrupted weakly.

The great Von de Vincent leaned forward across the table.

"Instead of you and the innocent maiden's old uncle having a fight on the edge of the cliff," he shot back dramatically, *"you and that bear'll have it!"*

Raviolo started, gasped.

"What th'—th—hell——" he half choked incredulously.

"She's a wow, ain't she?" the great Von cried.

"But that—that—damn bear——" Raviolo stammered, "will he—is he—safe?"

"Safest thing in the world," the great Von retorted confidently. "And it's the simplest. I watched that old red-whiskered—'hobo'—put the bear through his stunts, and got all their cues—their 'signal words.' They're funny words, but the bear understands them! The action, the way I've got it doped out and changed the continuity script"—the great Von went on—"will go like this:

"After the innocent maiden's old man has got her to leave you and go back home, he's got hold of a bear somewhere. He's trained him to watch the innocent maiden. But you don't know it! You sneak up to the cabin—just as in the continuity Jim wrote; you grab the girl—Arlene—when she opens the door; make a run; her yellin'—clawin'—scratchin'. Instead of the old uncle coming from behind the shack when he hears her squawling, the bear comes!" the great Von paused, glancing keenly at Raviolo to see if he was "getting" it; grasping the big idea.

Raviolo was grasping it.

"Instead of the old uncle," the great Von repeated, and proceeded, "the bear comes—unexpectedly—from around the corner of the cabin! You look back; see the bear; see him coming. It's a surprise to you! You run faster—he's about to catch you—you run still faster—toward the brink of the precipice. The bear's nearly on you; you're close to the brink. The bear's snappin' at your heels! You drop the innocent maiden—behind you; whirl; face the ferocious bear—with your bare hands battle the bear. Ain't that a killin'? Ain't that a 'hot-dog' shot?" he finished, exultingly.

"But—but—— My God!" Raviolo stammered, and stopped.

## CHAPTER XLVII

### "TOBASCO!"

FOR a moment there was silence while Raviolo, with trembling hand, lighted another cigarette. And for a moment, too, the great Von de Vincent studied, closely, the expression on Raviolo's face.

"There's nothing to it, Raviolo," the great Von resumed, motioning to Wong Gee to bring additional cups of coffee. "The bear's on to his job! He's trained to a flea's sneezer! And I've his start and stop signals all learned by heart.

"As you drop the innocent maiden and whirl to sacrifice your all, your last life's blood, in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle to save her—and yourself—from the mad wild rush of the fierce ferocious bear, when he comes up close you register 'courage—resolution'—bravery—and when he's right on to you you yell:

*"Tobasco!"* the great Von shot the word out suddenly.

Before Raviolo could speak the great Von resumed:

"When you yell—'Tobasco!'—the bear will stand up on his hind legs and wrestle! That's the big stuff. Make it rough; just as rough as you can—tear your shirt—rip your clothes; struggle; strain; pull; punch; sweat; swear and fight—fight—fight like hell!—register heroic, grim despair—but never give up! Then when you're just about exhausted, I'll megaphone: *'Garlic!'* And when I yell 'Garlic!' you yell 'Garlic'!"

"What'll he do when I yell—'Garlic'?" Raviolo asked shakily.

"He'll quit wrestling and lay down and pretend he's dead," the great Von de Vincent replied. "Then, all torn and mussed up"—he went on, enthusiastically—"you pick the girl up; register 'Victory!'—hold the girl in your clawed up, scratched up arms, against your panting breast; face the camera, with the bear that's supposed to be dead—that it looks like you've just killed with your naked hands—lyin' motionless on the edge of the cliff; we shoot the 'clinch' and the 'fade-out' and the 'innocent maiden' says the same thing as in the original script! It'll be the biggest thing of the year, Raviolo. The biggest shot ever put on the screen! You and me both will be ridin' high, dry and pretty when Old Henry Lurkins sees it in the run of the 'rushes'!"

"Does—does—Arlene know about this—this—bear proposition?" Raviolo asked. "Maybe she'll be—afraid——"

"She don't know about it, yet!" the great Von cut in. "She won't need to know till we're ready to shoot this fight-sequence and are already in it. Those two old fellows that own the bear will be 'planted' behind the shack out of sight, holding the bear. When the innocent maiden starts to yellin', after you've grabbed her, they'll turn the bear loose; that'll be their signal. Then here he'll come," the great Von paused, smiling happily, as he visioned the great thrill-shot he had figured out for *The Sheik's Revenge.*

"The one with the red whiskers," he went on, "is going to be the girl's uncle and the other one—with the squinty gray eyes and yellow whiskers—will be her old man, in the shots of them training the bear to guard the innocent maiden, but we'll shoot those sequences later—afterward. We'll 'can' this big 'eat-'em-up' finish shot first!"

"When—when do you begin to—shoot it?" Raviolo asked.

"To-morrow!"

"I—I—don't know about workin' with that fool—bear," Raviolo protested. "I believe I'd better have a—a—double in this——"

"No double!" the great Von interrupted firmly. "This is going to be 'Red-Hot-Mama' stuff! We've got to have close-ups of you personally in the action with the bear. We've got to have your face showing the big emotions you're going through, while you're struggling with him! So, there'll be no double. And that's that!" He stopped to light another cigarette and toss a bill on the table to pay Wong Gee for the coffee. After a moment he resumed:

"Now, don't booze up any more to-night, Raviolo! Be ready to be on the spot at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. The location is going to be on top of that hill with those trees and that old deserted shack on it, 'Slaughter House Hill,' these local hicks call it! It's got a dandy good cliff on the other side of it.

"The rest of the company won't go with us—we won't need them; just you and—and—Arlene and Rhetta, those two old geezers and their bear, the camera man and me. So, hit the hay pretty soon, Raviolo," the great Von went on kindly. "You look tired! Get a good night's rest. You'll need a lot of energy to-morrow, for she's going to be a big day! It's great stuff, old kid. This is going to be the making of you—and me both!" he finished encouragingly, pushing back from the table and rising.

Raviolo was silent, seemingly lost in deep thought, as they left Wong Gee's café and started, through the moonlight, toward Mother Skillern's hotel.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### SOLEMN AND DIRTY SHIRT GO TO BED

THE moon had mounted to the zenith of its arc; the calm of midnight lay, in gentle serenity, over the breast of the desert. There was that hush, that peaceful quietude, when all of Creation seems tranquilly sleeping. Not even the chirp of a horntoad was heard; not even the note of a bird.

It was then, and not till then, that Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith and Jug-Handle Jim reluctantly told Ed, the bartender, and the few customers yet in the Seventh Oasis, good night and wended their way toward their cozy, small cabin by the sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four.

Behind Wong Gee's café, beside the chicken coop, Versus, Solemn's and Dirty Shirt's faithful mouse-colored burro, stood chewing a bacon rind.

"I reckon she got all the beer she needs, for the present!" Dirty Shirt murmured, glancing at Versus.

"She ought to have," Solemn grunted unpleasantly. "She made four trips to the Seventh Oasis, and Ed gave her four buckets full—to my personal observation—and," Solemn went on, still peevishly, "she probably drunk the equivalent at each one of the other six saloons!"

"The blessed little thing's entitled to it!" Dirty Shirt chirped cheerfully. "Just think of everything that's happened since she decided to eat my sock that morning and

I started to throw that chunk of borax at her—and it made us discover the borax mine. Who'd have thought so much could happen, just on account of a burro eatin' a sock?"

"Nobody can ever tell what's goin' to happen!" Solemn grunted. *"Whether a burro eats a sock or not."*

"Well, things have happened because Versus eat my sock!" Dirty Shirt broke in. "And considerin' everything in connection with it, nobody with any humane emotions will object to her having all the beer she's capable of wanting, either!"

"As far as I'm concerned," Solemn growled back, "she can drown her whole dog-gone insides with beer, if she wants to, and I'll never raise a hand—to interrupt her!"

Dirty Shirt resented Solemn's unpleasant mood.

"Well, of all things," he flung back, impatiently, "as much whisky as you drunk to-night it looks like a normal individual would be happy!"

"Who the hell can be happy under the circumstances?"

"Under what circumstances?"

"Under the circumstances of what that bear has got us tangled up in!" Solemn retorted angrily. "I knowed when you objected to me shootin' him, out at Hellbroth Oasis, that sooner or later he'd get us complicated in some disagreeable feature, and now he's got us associated up with that movin'-picture industry. And there ain't any tellin' what sort of mess we'll be in before this thing is concluded!"

"There sure ain't!" Dirty Shirt laughed.

"There sure as hell ain't!" Solemn repeated viciously.

"There absolutely ain't," Dirty Shirt echoed, still laughing, "and for my part, I'm kind of rejoicin'! I always did hanker to be a movin'-picture actor. And, in addition, I'm kind of curious to see how Jug-Handle Jim will act. Do you reckon he'll chase that feller?"

"He'll do worse than chase him!" Solemn grunted.

"Well, I hope he does chase him," Dirty Shirt exclaimed, "and chase him good! It'll give me more encouragement to see that feller chased, than it did to—to —see—or maybe I ought to have said"—Dirty Shirt amended, grinning—"*smell* that Horace Duranto undone by Perfect Alibi that time!"

"He'll be chased!" Solemn mumbled again.

"I sure hope so," Dirty Shirt went on. "That director we made the contract with said that if Jug-Handle Jim photographs good—ain't camera shy—and does his stuff snappy in this experiment that he'd feature him next time! So I hope he chases him and after he chases him he wrestles him. Do you s'pose he will?"

"My Gawd A'mighty!" Solemn barked ungraciously. "Didn't you see the way Jug-Handle Jim acted—curled up his lip—when he saw him come in the Seventh Oasis? After seeing that, nobody but an idiot would have any doubt about him chasin' him—and ketchin' him, if he can —and wrestlin' him, and as hard as he can, if he does ketch him! Jug-Handle Jim chasin' him and ketchin' him and wrestlin' him ain't worryin' me half as much as what he's got us into. The idea of Solemn Johnson and Dirty Shirt Smith being dog-gone movin'-picture performers! If I'd only shot him——"

"You'd have been sorry to your ultimate end!" Dirty Shirt interrupted threateningly. "You'd have never survived even just shootin' him once," he started to continue as they entered their cabin. "But it's too late to argue to-night! It's time we were in bed. We're supposed to be 'on the set' "—he grinned as he used the professional term—"up behind that old shack on top of Slaughter House Hill at ten o'clock to-morrow morning! So, shut up and go to bed! Come on, Jug-Handle Jim, you can sleep here by my bed! If you sleep too close to that old

yaller-whiskered crawfish he might bite you. His whisky's soured on his stomach on him!"

There was nothing Solemn could or cared to say.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt, and Jug-Handle Jim, went to bed.

## CHAPTER XLIX

### "YELL GARLIC!"

IT WAS a gorgeous dawn; a splendid sunrise; an immaculate ten o'clock A.M. Never before had the desert been so beautiful, never the sky so blue.

So thought the great Von de Vincent.

Small wonder.

The great Von was on the verge of putting over the supreme event of his career. He believed the world, including Old Henry Lurkins, Sr., himself, the great "I-Am-Entirely-It," of the Colossal Cinema Corp., Ltd., would acclaim the great Von de Vincent the director-premier of all time, when their startled eyes beheld the "rush-run," the pre-view and the release of the scene he was about to shoot. The great Von had figured it out. He was sure of his ground.

The scene he was about to execute was a cinch.

It was to be nothing less than the daring, unparalleled, unprecedented, unmatchable thrill of a titanic struggle between the bare-handed, heroic Raviolo Mondejo—sheik of *The Sheik's Revenge*—and the gigantic, stupendous, ferocious savage bear, Jug-Handle Jim, on the very brink, the perilous edge, the extreme margin of the fifty-foot precipice which dropped straight downward, from the summit of Slaughter House Hill, to the small pond, which was scarcely more than a wet spot in the depths of Rattlesnake Canyon.

Such a shot—such a scene—the genius of the great Von de Vincent had conceived and was about to translate to the silver screen. If it didn't, in the language of the great Von himself, knock 'em dead; if it didn't bring 'em up standing—then throw 'em down flat—it would be because they didn't know "Art," they didn't know "thrills," and were blind, deaf, dumb, dumb-bells from their manicured toes to their marcelled bobs!

The bitter memory of the harsh, unhappy conversation which Old Henry Lurkins had inflicted on him, but a couple of days before, faded—like the fantastic mists of an unpleasant hallucination—from the great Von de Vincent's mind, as he stood, beside his luxurious limousine, near the deserted shack on top of Slaughter House Hill, and contemplated the perfect arrangements for the cinema shot of the century. Hell, the great Von thought to himself, make it plural: *centuries!*

Rhetta Rovelle, Arlene, the camera man were there.

A half-hour before, the great Von, in his own limousine, had himself driven them up.

Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith plus Jug-Handle Jim were there. Having walked up, an hour before, they had, as per the great Von's previous instructions, concealed themselves back of the deserted cabin, to await the cue for their entry into the approaching drama.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt silently sat in the shade, chewing tobacco. Jug-Handle Jim crouched at Dirty Shirt's feet.

Arlene was already inside of the shack, waiting near the door. Her headache was gone. In her make-up, applied by the skilful experienced hand of Rhetta, she was the picture of sweet, innocent girlhood. But as she stood—silent—alone, inside of the shack Arlene's dark eyes held a look of unhappiness, which even the excite-

ment of being "on the set" and about to appear before the camera could not dissolve.

Rhetta Rovelle sat in the great Von's limousine; the camera was "spotted"; the reflectors in place; the great Von de Vincent waited and then——

Raviolo Mondejo, "sheik" of *The Sheik's Revenge,* arrived.

Raviolo stopped his sedan by the side of the limousine.

Even his make-up did not conceal the ravages of a restless night. For Raviolo had, indeed, slept but little.

Each time he had dozed into troubled slumber, there had risen, before Raviolo's mental vision, a dream-mirage, of a small and charming town, in a fertile sun-kissed valley, between God's own sublime and silent hills—in Idaho. And Raviolo thought of his acquaintance there, in that lovely place, with a dark-eyed, trustful Italian, who was the father of a motherless "little sweeta girl"—in her teens—and whose name was "Angelina"; and who was the owner, too, of a bear, a large bear, a bear that had developed a profound and insistent animosity toward Raviolo Mondejo.

And the name of the bear was—*"Jug-Handle Jim."*

Raviolo had slept but little.

After Raviolo stopped his sedan, he sat for a moment, moodily surveying the "details" of the "set"—and wishing to God he had a double to work in his place in the forthcoming shots.

The great Von, smiling happily, stepped up to the side of Raviolo's car.

"Snap out of it, Raviolo, old kid! Come on! Get on the job! We're all set! The camera man is wild to earn his check," the great Von de Vincent began good-naturedly, stopped abruptly and frowned, as he saw, directly under Raviolo's knees, the gallon jug of Hollywood

moonshine whisky. "I wish to God you'd dump that stuff," he finished disgustedly.

"Wish and be *damned!*" Raviolo retorted. "I may have to take orders from the 'great Von,' " he said it sneeringly, "while in front of the camera; but my contract doesn't specify anything about any damned man tellin' me what I can, or can't, carry in my own personal sedan!"

The great Von de Vincent flushed, but let it go.

"All right, Raviolo. All right," he drawled, adding snappily. "But come on! Let's get busy. Don't forget your action!

"We start with you coming up to the door of the shack. You're cautious; peering around to see if the girl's old man is home. You discover that he's not; step up to the door; tap on it; the innocent maiden opens it—you grab her; she begins to yell—and fight. You run toward the edge of the cliff; with the girl in your arms. The bear comes around the corner of the house; you glance back—see him—show surprise; run faster; the girl yells louder—the bear is overtaking you.

"At the edge of the cliff the bear is almost on you; you drop the girl—behind you—remember that; whirl; face the wild—ferocious—bear; register courage; set yourself to meet the shock of the onrushing bear. Just when he's at you, you yell:

"*'Tobasco!'*

"The bear will stand up on his hind legs and wrestle with you. Both of you wrestle; wrestle like hell! Make it strong, Raviolo, do you get me? *Strong!* Muss yourself up—if the bear don't—but he probably will; tear your clothes, etc.; let the bear almost get you down—then a super-human effort. You rise up, strangling the bear with your bare hands, your face contorted with the agony of the struggle—be sure and let the camera see

your face contorted. Then, when I think you have wrestled long enough with the bear and you're mussed up enough, I'll megaphone:

*"'Garlic!'*

"That's the cue for the next action and for you to yell 'Garlic!' too. Yell it at the bear; right in his face; he will fall down—it will look like you've thrown him down. He'll play dead; lie still as if you've choked him—killed him. Don't forget to yell *'Garlic!'* when I yell it."

"Are you sure the bear will—will—understand?" Raviolo asked, a little tremulously.

"Sure, he'll understand!" the great Von answered confidently, "I saw him go through it all last night. Just don't forget to yell *'Garlic!'* or get confused, that's all! But I'm going to let you wrestle the bear for quite a while; I want to get all the footage of that fight in this picture that I can. It's going to be big stuff; awful big. But when I megaphone 'Garlic!' you *yell 'Garlic!'* That'll end the fight—the bear'll fall down. After that, you pick up the girl—the innocent maiden—for the clinch and the fade-out. You know the rest! Go ahead now."

The great Von de Vincent—megaphone in hand—backed up and stood by the camera; Rhetta sat in the limousine and watched. Raviolo moved out toward first position:

"Get ready, everybody!" the great Von snapped, quivering with excitement, with suppressed energy—like some magnificent hot-blooded race horse waiting for the snap of the starter's tape. "Spot in—about thirty feet from the cabin door, Raviolo! That's it! Come on! Move up! Crouch! That's the stuff. Give us your face! Show uneasiness. That's the dope! You're showing it! There you are! Get set! Now! Let 'er go! *Camera!*"

## CHAPTER L

### GREAT STUFF

WHILE awaiting Raviolo, Solemn and Dirty Shirt, with Jug-Handle Jim, squatted—wordless—behind the deserted cabin. When Raviolo first drove up, Jug-Handle Jim, already restless, became still more nervous and sniffed constantly at the air.

With some difficulty, Dirty Shirt restrained the great bear in his determination to break from cover, and go out to where the great Von de Vincent and Raviolo were talking.

As the great Von de Vincent shouted *"Camera!"* Solemn and Dirty Shirt stood up and, careful to keep out of range of the lens, peered around the corner of the shack. Dirty Shirt held one hand on the shaggy neck of Jug-Handle Jim, to hold him—by the pressure of his hand—in place.

Out front, Raviolo, cautiously, looking anxiously from side to side, approached the cabin. The camera was grinding. Inside of the shack, Arlene leaned against the door, waiting for Raviolo's knock. Rhetta, with experienced, rather bored eyes, sat in the great Von's limousine and looked carelessly on.

"Good stuff! Great stuff! Good action!" the great Von de Vincent megaphoned to Raviolo. "Keep it up! Come on. A little faster! That's better! Go on. Now! Tap on the door!"

Raviolo knocked on the door of the cabin. Arlene threw it open. She started back, at sight of him; her eyes dilated with revulsion, horror, loathing. Raviolo caught her arms; jerked her to him; lifted her, struggling and resisting, with an ugly laugh snarling into her ear:

"Don't think that damned Rhetta Rovelle is going to get you away from Raviolo, so easy, kid!"

"Yell! Fight! Scream, Arlene!" the great Von de Vincent shouted.

The command was obeyed before he finished uttering it.

The great Von's own voice was drowned by the piercing shriek that came from the lips of Arlene, the instant Raviolo's arms were about her.

"*Raviolo*—you beast!" she screamed. "Don't touch me! Turn me loose! Let me go!" Fighting wildly, frantically, to free herself: "Raviolo! Let me go!" she cried again and again. "Help! Oh! Daddy Tony! Jug-Handle Jim! Oh! Help!"

With the first terrified scream, the coarse hair under Dirty Shirt Smith's hand, on the neck of the great bear at his side, sprung upward—like wire bristles bent backward then suddenly released. A savage "Woof!"—more a roar than a growl—came from the shaggy throat of Jug-Handle Jim; he lunged forward, the very embodiment of terrible unrestrained—unrestrainable—fury and with astonishing swiftness hurled himself after the fleeing Raviolo who ran, with the still screaming, fighting Arlene in his arms, toward the edge of the cliff.

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt began, stopped, too surprised at Jug-Handle Jim's sudden madness, to go on.

Jug-Handle Jim was mad indeed—filled with madness.

He had heard every fighting-cry that he knew.

He had heard the hated "murder-word," *Raviolo!* which his beloved Tony, after Tony's "little sweeta Angelina" had gone away from the lovely small town in

the beautiful valley in Idaho, had taught Jug-Handle Jim was the signal—the command—to kill—to kill utterly, with all the vengeful savagery within his soul.

He had heard Raviolo's wicked, nasty laugh—answering Arlene's terrified scream—and it was the laugh of the fiend who had rejoiced in Jug-Handle Jim's suffering after the treacherous, Tobasco-hot beer.

More rage-inspiring even than these, Jug-Handle Jim had heard, in Arlene's despairing, fear-filled cry, the voice of his adored—lost—Tony's "little sweeta girl Angelina," and she was calling to Jug-Handle Jim. Out of the anguish of terror and dread and horror, she was crying for him to come.

And Jug-Handle Jim—went!

With that pitiful scream tearing the heart of Jug-Handle Jim, the silent pledge of obedience to the commands of Dirty Shirt Smith—"da nice-a man with da red whisk' "—was nothing—nothing—nothing.

"Great stuff! World-bustin' stuff! My God, what a shot! What action!" the great Von de Vincent cried to the camera man, excitedly, exultantly, as he saw Jug-Handle Jim's four hundred pounds of revengeful fury plunging after Raviolo, and the screaming girl in his arms.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt stood silently and watched Jug-Handle Jim pursue the sheik of *The Sheik's Revenge.*

Arlene looked back over Raviolo's shoulder.

"Oh! It's *Jug-Handle Jim!"* she cried unbelievingly, pleadingly. "Oh—oh! Jug-Handle Jim! Hurry! Please! Oh!"

"Gosh! Well of all things!" Dirty Shirt cried gleefully. "Look at that dog-gone bear! Just watch him run! He's chasin' him—all right! Chasin' him good, ain't he? And he ain't a bit—camera-shy," he went on joy-

fully. "I bet that director features Jug-Handle Jim the next time! My Gawd—My Gawd, that's good actin'——"

Solemn glanced at Dirty Shirt with withering contempt.

"Actin'?" he repeated scornfully. "That bear ain't actin'—you old idiot! That bear's in earnest! And something serious will happen when he ketches him!"

Something serious was already happening for Raviolo.

With Arlene's cry to Jug-Handle Jim, he too glanced back at the raging, charging bear. With a wild yell he threw Arlene to the ground; her head struck a stone; she crumpled into a limp, unconscious heap.

Rhetta sprang from the limousine and ran to Arlene.

The next moment—on the brink of the cliff—Raviolo whirled.

"'*Tobasco!*' Yell 'Tobasco!' Make him stand up and wrestle! Wrestle him! Wrestle him!" the great Von megaphoned to Raviolo. "God! What a scene! What a shot!" he added, to the camera man. "Get it! Get it! Keep grinding!"

The great Von's instructions to Raviolo were wholly unneeded.

It was too late.

Already, Jug-Handle Jim was reared to his full terrible height—taller than Raviolo, himself; the massive paws were reaching—striking—clawing at their cringing, groveling victim as he backed and still backed away, nearer—and ever nearer—to the brink of the precipice. Raviolo choked, stammered, gasped, his eyes blind with hopeless fear and horror. "Lie down! Play dead! Get away! Oh, God!"

The camera was grinding—grinding. Recording on a thin fragile strip of celluloid, the epic fight of all fights on the edge of a cliff.

A mighty paw swept out—a paw that was as soft, as gentle, as caressing as a mother's touch when it fondled the dead, dear body of Tony, in the moonlight, out at Hellbroth Oasis—but was now a tense, terrible, sinewy weapon of Death, and full on the side of Raviolo's head it struck. . . . The gurgling scream of despair, on Raviolo's lips, was smothered; before the horrified eyes of the helpless watchers, he plunged backward over the cliff. And Jug-Handle Jim, still raging, charged back and forth—alone—along the brink of the precipice.

"Cut! Cut! For God's sake cut!" the great Von de Vincent yelled to the camera man. "My God! He's knocked him off the cliff! But what a scene! What a whale of a shot! How do you get down there?" he shouted to Solemn and Dirty Shirt.

"There's an old road—there to the left," Solemn replied, motioning, "you can drive middlin' close to where he probably landed!"

The great Von de Vincent and the camera man sprang into the limousine.

Jug-Handle Jim continued to lumber savagely back and forth along the brow of the cliff; looking over—peering down—snarling as if he would leap off after his victim.

"Solemn and me won't need to go along," Dirty Shirt said, as the great Von threw in the clutch and turned the limousine about. "You two can take care of him. Solemn and me will stay here and help—look after the little girl and Jug-Handle Jim!" starting toward where Rhetta was kneeling by the side of Arlene.

The limousine was already speeding down the sandy slope of Slaughter House Hill.

"There wasn't any need to be in a rush about that—that—feller," Solemn grunted, as he picked up the unconscious form of Arlene and, followed by Rhetta and

Dirty Shirt, turned toward the cabin. "I heard his neck crack when Jug-Handle Jim hit him—so, he's—finished! And a little time—one way or the other—won't make much difference, as far as he's concerned! The first thing to do is to see how bad this child is hurt!"

"I heard it crack, too," Dirty Shirt said. "He gave him a h—a"—he hesitated, remembering that Rhetta was walking by his side—"a—whale of a whack!"

"But—wasn't his actin' wonderful——" Dirty Shirt started to add a little later.

"Get that canteen of water we left around there in the shade," Solemn snapped, as they entered the cabin. "Bring it—and shut the door, to keep out the heat!"

## CHAPTER LI

### JUG-HANDLE JIM GOES TO SLEEP

For a little while, Jug-Handle Jim charged savagely back and forth along the brink of the precipice. After a time, as if considering the incident closed, he turned and went to the place where Arlene had been thrown to the ground. He sniffed the hot sand, whimpering, eagerly, pitifully. She was gone. Jug-Handle Jim could not understand. He looked around. No one in sight. Nothing. Only Raviolo's deserted sedan. Even the camera was gone. True to professional traditions—"Save the Film!"—the camera man had quickly loaded it into the limousine.

Somehow, the sedan suggested Raviolo.

Jug-Handle Jim approached it. His bristles, which had again begun to be normal, started to rise once more. He growled—"woofed!" throatily, softly; walking around the car, nosing and sniffing at fenders and wheels. The door of the sedan was open. Jug-Handle Jim reared up; peered in.

Maybe the man he was chasing was there. No. Nor was Tony's beloved "little sweeta girl, Angelina"; nor even yet, "da nice-a man with da red whisk'." Everything; everybody was gone. Jug-Handle Jim was unhappy. Then he saw the gallon jug of Hollywood moonshine whisky. He reached a great paw into the sedan and dragged the jug to him; he sniffed at the cork;

took the jug up in his paws—with his teeth worked out the cork. Again, he sniffed at the neck of the jug. It was whisky. Jug-Handle Jim knew, by the smell, that it was whisky; a poor grade, inferior quality perhaps, but, without doubt it was whisky. He tipped the jug to his mouth and drank—drank till he had to stop to get his breath.

Once more, Jug-Handle Jim looked around. There was nobody. Nothing. It was terribly quiet on top of Slaughter House Hill. It didn't seem possible things had been so lively; such a little while before.

Now, it was lonesome.

Jug-Handle Jim took the gallon jug of whisky—moonshine; *Hollywood* moonshine—in his great hairy arms and shuffled around to the rear of the shack. No. No one was there. Solemn and Dirty Shirt—"da nice-a man with da red whisk' "—like every one—everything else—had left him.

A deep sigh came from the throat of Jug-Handle Jim.

He sat down on his haunches—and drank again from the gallon jug of—whisky. Another sigh came from the very depths of his soul.

But Jug-Handle Jim was puzzled. Twice he had drunk from that gallon jug of whisky and still there was more. Always before a bottle of whisky had been one drink—and only one—for Jug-Handle Jim. This "bottle" was acting queer; it wouldn't get empty. He drank again. No "bottle" of whisky should do that to him! And still it wasn't empty. He drank again! Still—it wasn't empty! He would fool it. Jug-Handle Jim drank again; paused—drank again; rested a moment, and drank again. Victory! That infernal gallon jug was empty. In the beginning it had been full—to the cork—with *Hollywood* moonshine whisky!

Jug-Handle Jim was pleased; he had done it!

But—— It seemed to Jug-Handle Jim that night was approaching. It was strange, unreasonable, uncanny, for night to approach so much ahead of time; while the sun was still in the sky's blue, deep, center. It was funny. But night was approaching. Things were becoming shadowy, hazy, dim—and dimmer still. No doubt of it. Night was approaching!

Jug-Handle Jim hated for night to approach.

He was too lonely—lonesome—to have night approach!

He was lonesome for Tony and Tony's "little sweeta girl, Angelina"—whose baby hands had "wooled" him around, bossed him, teased him, domineered him, loved him, cuddled him, petted him, ever since Jug-Handle Jim—so long, so very long ago—was himself just a clumsy, romping, orphaned—but happy—little Boy Bear.

But Tony, and Tony's "little sweeta girl, Angelina," were gone. Everything—everybody—was gone—gone, and night was approaching.

Suddenly Jug-Handle Jim was very tired; so tired—and lonesome—his mighty heart, his great loyal, faithful, devoted heart seemed breaking with the pain and the hurt of it all.

All at once, the beautiful yellow, golden sunshine became a pale, insipid twilight; the twilight shaded into thick and heavy dusk; the dusk changed to starless, all-enveloping blackness—silent and motionless—which folded Jug-Handle Jim to its breast. And Jug-Handle Jim lay down—and—slept.

## CHAPTER LII

### DIRTY SHIRT DOES A MUNCHAUSEN

THERE was an ugly bruise on Arlene's temple. She was slow in recovering consciousness. But in time, under the gentle ministrations of Rhetta—aided, as much as they could, by Solemn and Dirty Shirt—Arlene revived.

At once, she began to cry hysterically, struggling to rise.

"That bear was Jug-Handle Jim!" she cried. "Daddy Tony must be here. Where's Daddy Tony? Where's Jug-Handle Jim? I want my Daddy Tony! Where is he?" she sobbed.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt exchanged a look of understanding.

"She's *her!*" Dirty Shirt muttered, aside to Solemn.

Solemn snorted. "Huh! I knowed it," he said, "when I heard her first yell at that bear, a while ago!"

Rhetta thought Arlene was delirious.

"Be quiet—just a little while, dearie!" she soothed. "Let Auntie Rhetta bathe that nasty old hurt on your head!"

Arlene continued to sob brokenly:

"I—I—want my Daddy Tony! Where's Jug-Handle Jim? He was out there! Where is he? Daddy Tony'll kill Raviolo. Where's my Daddy Tony?" she repeated.

Dirty Shirt cleared his throat.

"You're—you're—Angelina?" he began questioningly, hesitatingly.

"Of course I'm Angelina!" the girl cried. "Raviolo made me call myself Arlene because he said it was a good—good—'picture' name—and—nobody would—know me by that name. Of course I'm Angelina," she again cried fretfully. "And that bear was our Jug-Handle Jim. Where's Daddy Tony? Why don't he come?"

Rhetta looked helplessly up at Solemn and Dirty Shirt.

"What in the world does the poor child mean?" she asked.

"I reckon," Dirty Shirt replied, "that that bear used to belong to her pa——"

"He belongs to him now," Angelina broke in sobbingly. "Jug-Handle Jim belongs to Daddy Tony *now*. Where is—Daddy Tony? Why won't you tell me? Why was Jug-Handle Jim out there and Daddy Tony wasn't? Has anything happened to Daddy Tony? Where are they now? Oh! Oh! Oh!" she wailed chokingly.

Solemn glanced at Dirty Shirt.

"You—you—tell—her!" he said. "You can—explain—things—better than me!"

"You'd better tell her yourself," Dirty Shirt replied.

"Now, don't cry," Solemn stammered. "Jug-Handle Jim is around here somewhere."

"But I want my Daddy Tony?"

Rhetta looked at Solemn.

"The child is on the verge of another collapse," she said. "If either of you gentlemen know of her father, it would be best to tell her—the truth. If you can!"

"Go ahead," Dirty Shirt said to Solemn. "You're the oldest! Tell her!"

Steadying his voice as well as he could, Solemn began.

"Now—now—honey," he said, haltingly, "you

mustn't—take on so! A little—accident—happened to—your—pappy——"

"Is Daddy Tony hurt?" Angelina cried. "Where is he? Is he sick? Was he hurt?"

"Why—why—yes," Solemn struggled on, perspiration dripping, unnoticed from his forehead, "he—he—was—hurt—pretty bad! So bad—you—you see——"

Dirty Shirt turned away, as Solemn began speaking, and stood looking out of the one small window of the cabin. In the distance, across Rattlesnake Canyon, he could see the borax mine; almost hear the rumble of the massive machinery crushing and converting the precious material into a golden stream of royalties for Solemn and himself. He thought of the red dawn—so long ago—when he awakened and found Versus chewing his sock. A mist came before Dirty Shirt's eyes as he remembered, and listened too, to Solemn's voice trying to break the unhappy news of her father's death, to the sobbing Angelina.

"Now—why—you see—honey," Solemn continued gently, patting the black bobbed head, "your—daddy was—was"—his voice sunk to a crooning whisper of ineffable tenderness—"was hurt so—so—bad that—well, honey, your dear daddy—is—is—dead." Even then, the last word was like the shock of a sudden pain.

"Dead? Daddy Tony—dead?" Angelina whispered, clutching Solemn's hand, her black eyes, wide with terror, looking up at him.

"Yes, honey," Solemn replied, making no effort to conceal the drops that fell slowly from his own kindly gray eyes. "Dirty Shirt and me done—all—we could for him. And—and—we buried him—nice and—and—safe out in the desert, so the coyotes or nothin' couldn't dig him out. Before he—died—he willed Jug-Handle Jim to Dirty Shirt and he—adopted—him—so we've

been taking nice care of—of—Jug-Handle Jim—and——"

As he listened, the mist was suddenly washed from Dirty Shirt's vision. An inspiration that made his face radiant, luminous, with the wonder of it, flashed through his mind. He turned back to the little group in the center of the cabin, and when Solemn hesitated, broke eagerly in:

"Yes, dearie, it's like Solemn says," Dirty Shirt began, "we buried your dear pappy, nice and secure. And he willed Jug-Handle Jim to me—and I—I—adopted him! And before your pappy went to—to—join the Angels—he made Solemn promise——"

Solemn looked at Dirty Shirt in bewildered astonishment, but before he could speak, Dirty Shirt went on:

"He made Solemn promise," Dirty Shirt repeated, "that if we ever found you—his—'little sweeta girl, Angelina'—that Solemn would be *your*—adopted daddy and—and guardeen—the same as I was of—of—Jug-Handle Jim! And—Solemn'll take good care of—of—you."

Solemn's gray eyes blazed at Dirty Shirt in amazement.

"Why you old—fool—— What—in—hell——" he stuttered.

"Shut up!" Dirty Shirt shouted. "I wasn't near through talkin' yet. Ain't you got any politeness at all? Interruptin' a private conversation that way!"

Solemn lapsed into the dumbness of hopeless, impotent rage.

"You see, the way it was—Baby," Dirty Shirt went on, glaring threateningly, yet grinning triumphantly, at Solemn, "Solemn always has wanted to—to—be—an adopted—daddy! He's just talked about it over and over till he's mighty nigh talked me to death about it. And especially be an adopted daddy of some nice sweet

little girl like you! One with black hair and eyes like yours and so, when your dear pappy was—was—awful sick and was tellin' us about you—not havin' any—any—mammy, or anything, and he was kind of worried about you, Solemn spoke up and said: 'Now, don't you worry a bit—not a bit! If any—any—thing happens, I'll be your little sweet girl, Angelina's adopted daddy, and take nice, good care of her! So, don't you worry a single bit!' That's what Solemn told your dear pappy, and Solemn will be your adopted daddy and look after you! Solemn's awful fond of being an—an—adopted daddy——"

"Why—you danged old red-whiskered——" Solemn tried to explode, his gray eyes furnaces of fury.

"Shut up again!" Dirty Shirt snapped. "Let me finish explainin' everything to this—little sweet girl and—and—lady"—glancing at Rhetta—"that you're going to be the adopted daddy of," he went on relentlessly. "Don't pay any attention to him, honey. He's just kind of bashful and—and—surprised—that he's gettin' to be an adopted daddy so—so—sort of—unexpectedly! But he'll get over it! It's just the way I said it was. Solemn's going to be your adopted daddy—'cause he promised your pappy he would be and—ornery as he is and everything, he never goes back on his word!

"If ever I told a—a—lie in my life—that's the way it is," Dirty Shirt was perspiring some, but determined to clinch things while he was at it. "Your dear pappy said he'd be awful glad if Solemn would be your adopted Daddy and guardeen and if I'd be Jug-Handle Jim's! And Solemn said he'd—he'd be more than pleased to, and I said I would too! Of course, Solemn and me work sort of together, and naturally, I'll kind of be your—your adopted uncle! But Solemn's your adopted—daddy. So, we'll be sort of—of—partners on it!"

Angelina had risen and stood with Rhetta's arms around her. She grew more quiet as Dirty Shirt's gentle voice went on, and as she saw the wonderful tenderness in his whimsical brown eyes.

Solemn had given up hope of checking Dirty Shirt; and decided to let him run his course; later, to take such action as seemed expedient.

Rhetta watched Dirty Shirt, her shapely lips trembling queerly.

"You see," Dirty Shirt went on, "it seems like your pappy got some sort of an—an—interest in a—a—tungsten claim before he—he—died—Jug-Handle Jim kind of helped him to—to—discover it"— Dirty Shirt smiled inwardly, with a little twitch of pride at his own artistry, as he alluded to Tony and Jug-Handle Jim's arrival at the tungsten tunnel—"kind of like Versus helped Solemn and me find the borax mine, that time! And before your pappy—died—Solemn and me told him we'd take over the tungsten proposition and manage it, and the income, of course, would help take care of you if we found you. It's a—a—pretty good proposition and the income will run—it's—about five hundred dollars a—a—month or a—thousand or whatever's necessary; so we're not to any expense or anything on account of Solemn being your adopted daddy. It won't be any trouble at all! We can just have the bank in Los Angeles attend to it, so it won't be a bit of bother to Solemn and me! I think it's awful nice for Solemn to be the adopted daddy of a little sweet girl like you. Don't you, lady?" Dirty Shirt turned appealingly to Rhetta.

"Wonderful!" Rhetta murmured, her honest blue eyes glowing with admiration for what she knew was Dirty Shirt's magnificent lie.

Solemn himself had gone to the window of the shack and stood, with his back to the others, looking out, as

Dirty Shirt had stood. Solemn's eyes were at first so filled with fury that he could scarcely see the borax mine across Rattlesnake Canyon. As Dirty Shirt talked, the anger faded from Solemn's eyes and he began to grin. When Dirty Shirt finished, with his appeal to Rhetta, Solemn slyly slipped the worn little memorandum book from his pocket; he turned the pages till he found one captioned and notated:

*"Solemn Johnson Acc't. Vs. Dirty Shirt Smith—To him shakin' Justice's cowbell at me while I was down in location hole on Dead Angel Mountain and makin' me think she was going to fall in on top of me. . . ."*

Solemn drew pencil marks through the lines; wrote across the page "Settled in Full," slipped the memorandum book back in his pocket, and, still grinning, murmured to himself:

"As successful a dog-gone lie as he's just told ought to settle up *damn* near anything!"

Facing about, Solemn approached Dirty Shirt and his fascinated audience in the center of the cabin.

## CHAPTER LIII

### "JUST CALL ME 'RHETTA'"

ANGELINA turned toward Solemn, put one small hand on his arm, looked earnestly, a little dazedly as if she could hardly yet believe Dirty Shirt's remarkable story, into Solemn's now twinkling gray eyes and said:

"You're really going to be my 'adopted' daddy? And I—I—won't be—all—alone, and can—live with you?"

Solemn flushed; but before he could reply, Dirty Shirt—not yet sure of Solemn's acceptance of the proposition that he be the "adopted daddy" of an orphan girl, just on the verge of exquisitely lovely womanhood—hurriedly broke in:

"Yes, he's going to be your nice old adopted daddy and I'm going to be your adopted uncle! But it—it"—Dirty Shirt went on,—"it'll be kind of hard for a little sweet girl like you to live with—with—Solemn and me, the way we 'rough-it-around' and everything. And it's funny, but Solemn and me were talkin' over just that particular part of it before the—the—picture show—started up here on the hill a while ago, and we were settin' out behind the cabin waiting for that director to get things started! We was talkin' over that very part of it. And we thought maybe—we kind of—wondered if we couldn't get the—the lady to be a sort of adopted chaperon—or—adopted auntie or something for you and let you live with—with—her, or her live with—with—you in some nice place like Hollywood or somewhere

where you'd have conveniences! Of course the—five hundred or thousand dollars or whatever's necessary a month from the—the—tungsten proposition will pay the expenses and every thing——" perspiration was oozing from Dirty Shirt's face; he hesitated, turned his imploring brown eyes again toward Rhetta, looking at her much as a big, innocent dog might look at its master, craving sympathy, and finished: "We—we—Solemn and me kind of—of—wished she would!"

The look Rhetta gave back was from eyes dewy with the moisture of sympathy and—pride—that there was a man in the world who could turn the masculine—and too often feminine—sin of prevarication so artistically to such splendidly philanthropic purposes. Dirty Shirt flushed as he looked into her eyes and drew a trembling sigh of relief, assured that Rhetta was his ally.

"Won't that be fine! Glorious!" Rhetta exclaimed. "I was just planning to take Angelina into my little apartment, when we finished this location, and intended, if possible, never to let her go on another set unless I was called for the same work myself. You see," she finished, a little wistfully, "I am—alone—too, and it will be wonderful for Angelina and me to be together!"

"My gosh, that's dandy!" Dirty Shirt chortled happily.

"Oh, Rhetta, can I? Can I *live* with you?" Angelina cried tremulously, and the girlish arms, starved since babyhood for the joy of clinging to a mother's breast, locked themselves around the graceful shapely neck of the widow.

"Indeed, yes, dearie," Rhetta replied, kissing the girl's hurt temple. "We'll get a larger apartment than mine, or a cute little house, and have a—home—a real, truly home. And I—will be your—your"—she glanced, with a twinkle of mischief in her blue eyes, at the now relieved and radiant—almost handsome—though still a little em-

barrassed, Dirty Shirt—"I'll be your—adopted—auntie."

Solemn had been convinced, soon after Dirty Shirt started on his surprising proposition, that Dirty Shirt would finally, successfully "lie himself through" to some sort of a safe solution.

"Those arrangements will be perfectly all right—O. K. in every detail—" he spoke. "You"—he said, smiling at Angelina—"and the lady—Miss—Misses——" he hesitated.

"Rhetta Rovelle," the widow filled in, adding sweetly, "but please, just call me Rhetta."

"Musical name," Dirty Shirt murmured admiringly.

Solemn glanced at Dirty Shirt, grinned, muttered under his breath: "Th' sentimental old red-whiskered idiot!"

"You and—and—Rhetta," Solemn continued aloud to Angelina, and stumbling over the first-speaking of the widow's name, "can have you a nice place in Hollywood or Los Angeles or wherever you want it, and Dirty Shirt and me can go on the way we have been doing for the last nearly forty years and—not—not be interrupted—much. So," he finished gently, "it's all right, honey—An—Angelina. I'll be your old adopted daddy—under the circumstance. The way I—I—promised your—dear—pappy—I would!" he concluded, deciding at the last moment that he would share Dirty Shirt's sin of falsification and if Dirty Shirt was consigned to perpetual brimstone for it, that he would be consigned with him—since they were also partners in everything else.

Angelina seemed hardly able, even yet, to realize the number of relatives she had suddenly acquired.

"And you—you"—turning to Dirty Shirt—"will be my adopted uncle?"

"Yep! Yep! That's the idea!" Dirty Shirt replied snappily. "Solemn'll be your old yaller-whiskered adopted daddy, and I'll be your old red-whiskered adopted

uncle, and—and—Rhetta"—Dirty Shirt too, stumbled over the "musical" name, but to be sure it was right, repeated it—"Rhetta will be your—your—nice, good-lookin' adopted auntie!"

Rhetta smiled—blushed a little—at the naïve compliment.

"And will you—come to see us?" Angelina asked again.

Dirty Shirt's brown eyes were lifted to Rhetta.

"Yes—sure—you bet! That's the scheme!" he answered. "We'll probably come to see you—kind of often. Solemn will want to know how his little sweet adopted girl is getting along and I'll—I'll want—to—will have to go along with him to keep the old centipede-squasher from getting run over by the street cars," Dirty Shirt finished with a laugh.

Solemn's gray eyes flashed resentfully at Dirty Shirt.

"I ain't so danged much older than some other dog-gone idiots—an' especially a certain old whiskered one I could name—be!" he muttered half angrily.

"Will you—bring—Jug-Handle Jim?" Angelina began, broke off suddenly, and exclaimed, "Oh, where is Jug-Handle Jim?"

"My gosh!" Dirty Shirt cried anxiously. "We've blame near entirely forgot Jug-Handle Jim. We'd better look him up!"

"Did he hurt—Raviolo?" pronouncing the name hesitatingly—as if it was something disagreeable—as they went out of the cabin to search for Jug-Handle Jim.

"Just broke his neck's all. And knocked him off the cliff!" Solemn replied. "But don't worry about that! That director and the feller that worked the picture-takin' machine went after him quite a while ago! They've probably took his corpse to Red Bluff by this time. But we'd better find Jug-Handle Jim," he finished, "he might get into some mischief if we don't kind of watch him!"

## CHAPTER LIV

### JUG-HANDLE JIM STILL SLEEPS

No Jug-Handle Jim answered to Dirty Shirt's friendly shout, nor yet to the sweet-voiced, pleading call of Tony's "little sweeta girl, Angelina"—a voice for which Jug-Handle Jim had done murder—according to the laws of man; the laws by which Jug-Handle Jim had his being, may have had—who can say?—another name for it.

Neither was there any Jug-Handle Jim in sight among the few piñon trees, nor could he be seen anywhere on Slaughter House Hill.

"I hope to God," Solemn muttered uneasily, "that he ain't gone off down to Red Bluff and killed anybody else. One's plenty for to-day!"

"Maybe he's around behind the cabin!" Dirty Shirt suggested, leading the way to the rear of the deserted shack. "There's shade around there. There he is!" he exclaimed, as they rounded the corner of the building. "Nice old Jug-Handle Jim. He's takin' a nap, ain't he!"

At sight of the bear, Angelina ran forward, ahead of the rest; dropped down and threw her arms over Jug-Handle Jim's neck. She drew back suddenly, looking wide-eyed at the great shaggy, motionless body and cried:

"Why—why—he's not breathing!"

"What?" Dirty Shirt shouted, rushing forward and stooping over the bear.

"He ain't breathin'?" Solemn echoed incredulously.

"He's dead!" Dirty Shirt exclaimed, straightening up. He looked around and saw the gallon jug. "Pick up that jug, Solemn, and see what's been in it!"

"I know what's been in it!" Angelina said, observing the jug. "Bootleg whisky was in it. Raviolo had it in his sedan; he brought it from Hollywood!"

"Was it full?" Solemn asked, smelling of the empty jug and making a wry face.

"Yes," Angelina replied. "Raviolo had a bottle that he drank from, coming over to Red Bluff. He hadn't taken any out of the jug when we got here last night!"

"Dead? Is he dead?" Rhetta murmured pityingly, looking down at the bear.

"He's dead. Jug-Handle Jim's dead all right," Solemn answered, throwing the empty jug against a rock. "He drunk that whole gallon of moonshine whisky. And there ain't any doubt about a gallon of *Hollywood* moonshine whisky killin' a bear—or anything else!"

When Angelina realized that Jug-Handle Jim was really dead, she suddenly broke down, sobbing again. She knelt down by the body of the bear, caressed the unfeeling form, petting it, crooning to her great dead pet, while hot tears, not only of sorrow but of repentance and self-blame, as well, streamed down her cheeks:

"Dear—dear—old Jug-Handle Jim," she murmured brokenly, "you—was—was—hunting Daddy Tony's—bad—bad—little sweeta Angelina."

With her face buried in the rough hair on the giant, stiffening body, she sobbed piteously.

After a little while Rhetta lifted her up:

"Come on, dearie. We can't help him—now! We'll drive back to the hotel in Raviolo's sedan. You need rest!"

"Yes, that's right, Angelina," Dirty Shirt added.

"You ladies go on down in the car! Solemn and me will walk down and—later—we'll send some one up to—to—take care of Jug-Handle Jim!"

There was silence between Solemn and Dirty Shirt as they shuffled slowly down Slaughter House Hill, following Angelina and Rhetta in Raviolo's sedan.

At the foot of the hill, Dirty Shirt casually suggested:

"Hadn't we better drop in at Saloon Number One and get a drink or two?"

"That's what I was schemin' on doin'," Solemn retorted, adding, a little impatiently, "I knowed damn well that bear would get us into a hell of a mix-up. Now if I'd only have shot him——"

"Well, of all things!" Dirty Shirt broke in sharply. "Yes—'if only you'd shot him,' " he mimicked angrily, "he'd have been et by buzzards and coyotes and ants long before now! Which would have been," he added with almost contemptuous emphasis, "an example of a danged old yaller-whiskered centipede-dodger interferin' with and shooting a connectin' link of Providence! Ain't that the truth, you darned old *imitation* savage?"

Solemn studied a moment, chuckled and replied:

"I ain't saying it ain't—'sickologically' approximate," he began.

" 'P-sy-chologically,' " Dirty Shirt interrupted.

" 'Sickologically' approximate," Solemn repeated, ignoring the correction, "even if it was said by the most productive old red-whiskered liar this side—of a Los Angeles real estate office!"

Dirty Shirt grinned.

"Furthermore and plus," he resumed, without comment on Solemn's delicate suggestion that he was not always veracious, "no buzzards nor coyotes—or even ants—ain't never going to eat Jug-Handle Jim! Not only is he

going to be buried decent and proper, but likewise he's going to have a—a—monument."

"Well, who in blazes is arguing about it?" Solemn broke in impatiently. "Nobody said he wasn't! Hurry up and come on—I'm blamed near assassinated with dryness!"

Shortly thereafter, Solemn and Dirty Shirt detoured. Hurriedly, they cut across the vacant ground in the rear of Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel. To avoid the crowd collected about the great Von de Vincent's limousine, in which was the broken, mangled remains of Raviolo Mondejo, the dead sheik of *The Sheik's Revenge,* and who would never again, from the silver screen, send emotional shivers through the palpitating hearts of super-sensitive female fans; or ever again, with his "personality-plus" romanticize young, motherless, immature girls and lure them into the hard, dangerous—too often unhappy—life of extras on the studio lots of Hollywood, or Culver City, or possibly even, in a pinch, of Burbank.

And out in the desert a small dust cloud whirled up—danced, for a little distance, like a fragile, spiral nymph, before the playful wind, dissolved, and was gone, and there was nothing but dry, dead heat on the yellow, motionless sands.

## CHAPTER LV

### OTHER SCHEMES

It was some months after the last previous sequence in the continuity of the "Adventures of Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith," and in which they made their one and only, to date, venture into motion pictures.

It was nearly sundown.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt stepped out of the Seventh Oasis, into the wide single-sided street of the two-hundred-and-seven-person, one Chinese laundry, seven-saloon metropolis of Red Bluff.

The yellow, golden, late afternoon sun was hanging a little above the ragged, jagged, wind-swept peaks of Tombstone Range. Over the desert there was the almost throbbing silence which that season of the year too often brings. Dead Angel Mountain loomed ghostly, barren—desolate—on the verge of Hellfire Basin, near Hydrophobia Gulch, far to the northeastward. Beyond Burro Butte, opposite Slaughter House Hill, across the gulch detouring from Rattlesnake Canyon, a fume of dust swirled upward from the crashing, roaring machinery of the borax mine.

To the distant north, barely discernible on the dim horizon, was the low, faint outline of Resurrection Ridge; behind it, at the mouth of Sodamint Canyon, was Hellbroth Oasis and there—beside the little spring, the waters from which, when salt and pepper are added, tastes like a thin, synthetic, but possible chicken soup—

was one lone, dwarf piñon tree; and nothing else.

Solemn and Dirty Shirt stood for a moment, without speaking, in front of Saloon Number Seven.

They glanced to the north. Let their eyes wander slowly over the boundless, measureless, sweep of desert, for an instant. Then, as by mutual agreement, they gazed toward Slaughter House Hill, on the summit of which the few clustering piñon trees, the deserted cabin, one time occupied by the butcher, and a shaft of granite, were silhouetted against the purpling eastern sky.

"Hanged if I ain't a notion to take a walk," Solemn muttered.

"Hanged if I ain't, too," Dirty Shirt said simply.

"Suppose we do," Solemn suggested.

"Reckon we'd just as well," Dirty Shirt quietly answered.

As they were passing Wong Gee's café, they saw Versus, their faithful mouse-colored burro, standing languidly, idly, by the sunny side of the building. She looked up, saw Solemn and Dirty Shirt and silently followed them.

Without speaking, the trio trudged steadily onward.

Past Saloon Number Four, Saloon Number Three, Saloon Number Two, Saloon Number One, Mother Skillern's two-story frame hotel, and on, toward Slaughter House Hill.

At last Dirty Shirt drew a square, dainty envelope from the pocket of his shirt, over his heart.

"My Gawd, are you going to read that letter again?" Solemn exclaimed fretfully.

"Ain't I got a right to read a letter again?" Dirty Shirt retorted. "Especially a letter from our own adopted—little sweet Angelina and—and—adopted chaperon! Anyhow," he went on, "I ain't read it as many times as you did yourself yesterday, when it was your

day to carry it. So what privilege has any old sand-slusher got to object? And what the hell good will it do him if he does object?" Dirty Shirt finished defiantly, drawing the scented sheet of paper from the envelope and reading while he walked.

Solemn snorted, said nothing, shuffled silently on.

A little later Solemn, Dirty Shirt and Versus stood on the summit of Slaughter House Hill, in front of the granite monument near the cluster of piñon trees.

Versus, also, looked earnestly at the polished shaft of stone, on which was the figure of a bear, recumbent, and some chiseled lines of verse; presently she put her nose to the ground and snuffled about, uneasily.

"That's what I call a danged good poem that Colonel Spilkins wrote for Jug-Handle Jim's tombstone," Dirty Shirt exclaimed softly.

Instead of replying directly, Solemn slowly read aloud:

*"Here lies the remains of a Bear—*
*His name was 'Jug-Handle Jim';*
*He was a useful citizen—*
*But Hollywood booze got him!"*

" 'Tis a pretty good verse," Solemn muttered, as he finished reading the eulogistic inscription. "But I kind of wisht he'd have got the word *'faithful!'* worked in on it, somehow."

"Maybe it would have been better," Dirty Shirt conceded, "but everybody knows that Jug-Handle Jim was faithful. And she sounds good to me just as she is!"

In a little while, Solemn, Versus and Dirty Shirt turned, and started again down Slaughter House Hill: Dirty Shirt, once more, perusing the letter.

"Rhetta says Angelina is doing—excellent—at the dramatic school . . . and the great Von de Vincent

thinks that new outfit he is with now, will star her next year. Gosh, won't that be fine, wonderful!" Dirty Shirt commented, as he read that which both he and Solemn, already, had more than learned by heart. ". . . And they're both countin' the days," he went on, "till we get in to see them again . . . and if we don't stay entirely over the holidays and even longer, if possible, that her and Angelina neither one won't have any nice Christmas at all," he finished, folding the letter and slipping it back in the envelope.

There was a moment's pause. Solemn seemed disinclined to talk.

"I always kind of hated Christmas to come before," Dirty Shirt murmured thoughtfully, "it used to sort of make me—melancholical! But now," he chuckled, "I—I—kind of want to—hang up my sock, myself!"

"If you hung it up," Solemn grunted gruffly, yet grinning, "Versus would probably eat it!"

"She sure did a good job of eatin' one once," Dirty Shirt began, stopped, while his eyes rested on the westward rim of the world.

The yellow sun dropped, in a blaze of glory, behind the stark black crags of Tombstone Range.

"Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt exclaimed, *"the sun's gone down!"*

Solemn looked around, in astonishment.

"Well, what if it has?" he snapped. "If nothing happens—it'll come up again in the morning!"

A shrill, keen, challenging crow, the appeal of a fighting rooster to some one to come and engage in mortal combat, suddenly followed Solemn's optimistic retort. The bugle-like call to battle came from a direction which was the direction of the rear of Wong Gee's café. Solemn and Dirty Shirt looked that way, and listened. No rooster crowed in reply.

"Wonder if Wong Gee will get another rooster for the fightin' rooster he got, to take the place of Angel, to fight with since the fightin' rooster he got killed the rooster he got for him to fight with? If he don't he'll probably get melancholical and lonesome, like Angel did," Dirty Shirt observed, carelessly.

Solemn stalked silently on.

Dirty Shirt studied a moment, musingly.

"Old—Old Bob is gettin' kind of old," he began, "but—don't you reckon, if the fightin' rooster Wong Gee got to take the place of Angel, does get despondent and repressed and lonesome, like Angel got, because he ain't got another rooster to fight with, it would be advisable to fix Old Bob up and sort of arrange to unrepress him like we unrepressed Angel that time?"

Solemn, too, had been studying, musingly while Dirty Shirt was speaking. He looked up, as Dirty Shirt finished his hypothetical query.

"If that fightin' rooster Wong Gee got to take the place of Angel, needs unrepressing because he ain't got another rooster to fight with," Solemn shot back, "he'll have to unrepress himself. From this on, I've got other occupations, besides unrepressin' fightin' roosters that need unrepressin' because they ain't got another rooster to fight with. I ain't interested in whether roosters are unrepressed or not! If they've got to unrepress, they've got to unrepress on their own hook. They won't get any assistance toward expression from Solemn Johnson! *I've got other schemes,"* he finished abruptly.

"My emotions are similar. Neither am I, and so have I!" Dirty Shirt laughed, hesitated an instant, and as Solemn did not reply, reverted to the original proposition:

"What are you going to take Angelina and—and—Rhetta—for—presents?" he stammered slightly. "Per-

sonally, I've already got mine all figured out in my mind—for Rhetta and Angelina both. For one thing, I saw a picture of a danged nice-lookin' automobile—a better one than the one they've got. And Rhetta's a hell of a good driver! It's kind of cute—her callin' me 'D. S.,' instead of 'Dirty Shirt,' because she says 'Dirty Shirt' don't seem to sort of fit—the—the *'subject,'* ain't it?" he ended, flushing and a little embarrassed.

Solemn's gray eyes flashed scornfully.

"If you wasn't so dad-blasted old," he said, biting off a chew of tobacco and twisting off another chunk which he put between the lips of Versus, who had crowded up close to his side when she saw him take out his plug, "if you wasn't so danged old"—he went on—"the way you go on about—Rhetta—I'd damn near believe——" Solemn stopped, hopelessly; as if it was impossible to believe what he really would believe.

Dirty Shirt flushed again, and more.

"Go ahead and believe," he flung back, "—you old wrinkle-necked scorpion-exterminator! There ain't any law against any man, no matter how old he is, believin' any dog-gone thing he wants to believe! So, just believe and believe and keep on believin' till you believe your old stubborn old head off, as far as I'm concerned!"

Solemn snorted disdainfully, trudged on; and soon Solemn Johnson plus Dirty Shirt Smith, plus Versus, their faithful mouse-colored burro, were at the cozy, if small, little cabin at the foot of the sand ridge in the rear of Saloon Number Four.

Solemn immediately entered the cabin, to begin preparations for supper; Versus went to the window, paused, stood looking in, waiting for Solemn to toss her a bacon rind—which, in a moment, he did.

Dirty Shirt stopped at the door, turned about and looked silently, thoughtfully, across the miles of un-

dulating, desolate, Sodom-cursed, yet alluringly bewitching desert, that stretched away toward the direction in which was the lovely, sometimes abused, often misquoted suburb of Los Angeles and which some one, sometime—at some primitive period in its history—had romantically named "Hollywood."

A queer, pathetically wistful, yet not wholly unhappy softness came into the humorous, good-natured, brown eyes of Dirty Shirt Smith.

"What the hell you lookin' at?" Solemn Johnson barked suddenly, from the cabin door behind Dirty Shirt.

"I—I—— Well, of all things," Dirty Shirt stammered. "Ain't that—a—a—dust cloud over yonder?" he finished with an impudent, inscrutable, triumphant, unanswerable laugh.

THE END

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